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**“Shuttles in the rocking loom of history”: Dislocation  
in Toni Morrison’s Fiction**

**by  
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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English**

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted for a degree at another university and does not contain previously published material.



## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the trope of 'dislocation' within the later novels of Toni Morrison, identifying it as central to her representation of African American history and experience. Organising my project around the theme and figure of dislocation allows me to bring together diverse considerations such as those of the geographical, communal, familial, cultural, corporeal and narrative displacements that preoccupy Morrison's fiction. Developing a line of enquiry neglected within the field of scholarship addressing Morrison's work, most importantly my thesis finds this term useful for negotiating the author's engagement with the diaspora engendered by racial slavery. In particular, it explores her evocation of the black diaspora as a configuration encompassing sites of remembering, affirmation and potentiality as well as processes of displacement, disruption, deracination and loss.

My research is informed by a broad range of critical resources but especially Edouard Glissant's and Paul Gilroy's theories of diasporic interaction. Tracing symbolic spatial trajectories and enabling and disabling relationships to the past, I investigate Morrison's imaginary in terms of a black Atlantic of roots and routes, patterns of traversal, connection and exchange. Rejecting a narrowly defined notion of African American Studies, this thesis seeks to extend the ways in which Morrison's novels are approached, locating in them a truly diasporic vision.

## Introduction: “Slavery broke the world in half”

The African American novelist and critic Toni Morrison is one of the most widely known and respected writers working today. The author of seven novels and one book of essays as well as the editor of several other critical collections, Morrison’s career as a published writer began with the first edition of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 and continues to the present.<sup>1</sup> Her fiction addresses issues of African American history, experience and identity, often also engaging with questions of sex and gender, and, to a lesser degree, class. Once writing in an environment where all but a few black authors struggled for recognition, now the subject of much acclaim,<sup>2</sup> Morrison’s work has prompted numerous and diverse critical responses. This is the case especially since the publication of *Beloved* in 1987. During the last fifteen or so years scholarship treating the Morrison oeuvre has burgeoned, making her surely one of the most discussed authors of the contemporary period.

The industry surrounding, in particular, Toni Morrison’s fiction, means that in researching this topic I enter an already densely inhabited arena.<sup>3</sup> Criticism has

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<sup>1</sup> Her novels are *The Bluest Eye* (1970) (London: Picador, 1990), *Sula* (1973) (London: Vintage, 1998), *Song of Solomon* (1977) (London: Vintage, 1998), *Tar Baby* (1981) (London: Vintage, 1997), *Beloved* (1987) (London: Picador, 1988), *Jazz* (1992) (London: Picador, 1993) and *Paradise* (1998) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). All future references to the above will appear in the text. Other major publications include *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. by Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), *Birth of a Nation’ hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case*, ed. by Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Lacour (London: Vintage, 1997), *The House that Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, ed. by Wahneema Lubiano and Toni Morrison (New York: Vintage 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Morrison was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, this award being an indicator of the respect that her work has garnered.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Carl Plasa notes, “[t]he productivity of Morrison’s activities as writer, critic and cultural commentator is matched by the extent of the critical interest that her work has generated, especially following the appearance of *Beloved*”. Carl Plasa, ed., *Toni Morrison Beloved* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.6. Morrison’s fiction is the focus of many essay collections, one of the earliest being *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co, 1988). This was followed by *Modern Critical Views Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), and then *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993). More recent collections include *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), *New Casebooks Toni Morrison*, ed. by Linden Peach (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) and *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Marc Conner (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000). Monographs have also been forthcoming, three of the

tended to situate Morrison's novels within a black U.S. literary tradition and / or feminist fields of enquiry. Some scholarship reads her work in terms of the concerns of a broader tradition of North American literature. Whilst several critics have chosen psychoanalytic approaches,<sup>4</sup> few have so far employed theories of class or of postcolonialism.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, despite the plurality of critical

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most insightful being *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* by Philip Page (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* by Gurleen Grewal (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998) and *Toni Morrison Contemporary World Writers* by Jill Matus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). By the late 1990s publications focused on individual Morrison novels were appearing. These included *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. by Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), *Modern Critical Interpretations Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. by Barbara Solomon (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1998), *Toni Morrison Beloved*, ed. by Carl Plasa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms*, ed. by Solomon and Marla Iyasere (New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 2000) and *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths* by Justine Tally (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1999). In addition there have been special issues of periodical publications devoted to Morrison's work. A double issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* published in 1993 was then developed into the essay collection, *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*, ed. by Nancy Peterson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997). And in 1998 *Studies in the Literary Imagination* published an issue about the relation of Morrison's writings to the American South. Surprisingly few studies have approached her fiction through comparative reference to that of other authors. Perhaps the most intertextual analysis has been completed on Morrison and William Faulkner, a notable example of this work being *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross and Judith Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997). One further important publication in terms of Morrison scholarship is the collection of twenty-four of the author's interviews conducted between 1974 and 1992, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> In an essay discussing methodological approaches to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* Barbara Christian suggests that those rooted in European intellectual theory, such as psychoanalysis, are proliferating to the extent that "the power of [*Beloved*] as a specifically African American text is being blunted". Barbara Christian, 'Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*', in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.363-370 (p.363). Carl Plasa also notes the number of psychoanalytic readings of *Beloved* but he writes "[i]n one sense, this kind of theoretical emphasis is hardly surprising for ... the issues of 'time, memory and mourning' with which Morrison's fiction as a whole is recurrently concerned are also very much the grist of psychoanalysis". Plasa, *Toni Morrison*, p.133. He finds essays by Jennifer Fitzgerald and Jean Wyatt to be amongst the best examples of this approach.

<sup>5</sup> See Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991) for an exception. Sally Keenan approaches *Beloved* as a postcolonial text, claiming that as well as considering "processes of 'internal colonization' ... Morrison's novel can also be read as contributing in a wider sense to contemporary postcolonial discourse, as it offers a perspective on African American history and literature which refuses to place its origins in the institution of slavery but, instead, situates that history within the larger context of the African diaspora". Sally Keenan, "'Four Hundred Years of Silence': Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", in *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism*, ed. by Jonathan White (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp.45-81 (p.46). Plasa observes, "[d]espite the importance of the place that [*Beloved*] so clearly occupies in the theoretical reflections of post-colonial critics such as

responses formulated, many aspects of Morrison's fiction remain unexplored or under explored. Motivated by the compelling power and beauty of Morrison's art, but also a sense that the critical debate about it can be and needs to be extended, I propose to address the theme and figure of 'dislocation', finding this to be a useful term for negotiating the author's engagement with the black diaspora, its sites of remembering as well as its displacements and losses.<sup>6</sup>

My thesis, entitled "'Shuttles in the rocking loom of history': Dislocation in Toni Morrison's Fiction", will concentrate on the author's later novels, seeking to assess her investigation of the disruptions engendered by racial slavery in America. The quotation of my title, deriving from Robert Hayden's poem 'Middle Passage', evokes processes of movement, traversal and interaction.<sup>7</sup> When read in the context of African American experiences it also connotes the forced migrations caused by the intercontinental slave trade. This potent image of "[s]huttles" provides a useful analogy for describing my thesis which will examine Morrison's imaginary of diasporic displacement. Not only does it suggest the Middle Passage, but also other trajectories key to my reading of her work.

Toni Morrison's commentary in a discussion with Paul Gilroy establishes her conception of the forces and effects of the slave trade. The writing of this

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Paul Gilroy and Homi K. Bhabha, Keenan's inclusion of *Beloved* under the rubric of the post-colonial is relatively unusual within criticism on the novel". Plasa, *Toni Morrison*, p.117. He himself offers a useful consideration of *The Bluest Eye* and the work of Frantz Fanon. See Carl Plasa, *Textual Politics From Slavery to Postcolonialism: Race and Identification* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000). Keenan writes, "[t]his lack of attention can be explained in part by the complex character of the United State's emergence as a nation, in which it played the role both of the colonized, fighting a war of independence from European control, as well as that of the colonizer of an indigenous population and of African slaves. That the inclusion of Native and African American histories in postcolonial discourse has not been axiomatic in the past signals a failure to address the processes of colonization on which the foundation of the United States rests". Keenan, p.45.

<sup>6</sup> Although helpful and original articles and book length studies have been published, much writing about Morrison's work seems to me to remain within familiar perimeters. For example, essays on *Jazz* almost exclusively discuss the novel's 'musical' form. Some of these pieces offer extremely effective analysis yet the dominance of this reading means that other aspects of the text are neglected. In addition, critical attention has so far been distributed unevenly between the novels, *Beloved* understandably stimulating the biggest response, but other publications such as *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* still barely being discussed. The exception to this with regards to *Paradise* is Justine Tally's book. See my previous reference, footnote 3.

conception in various ways into her fiction provides the focus of my project. The author observes,

modern life begins with slavery ... in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with 'post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness ... These strategies for survival made the truly modern person ... Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way.<sup>8</sup>

This is a vision of modernity with the black diaspora at its heart. The disruption of known ways of life, the loss of cultural and ancestral connection, the experiences of disorientation and “dissolution”, and the forced geographical displacement undergone by enslaved Africans emblemise for Morrison her sense of modern existence. Here other accounts of modernity – those of Hegel, Marx and Habermas, for instance – are revised as slavery assumes a central role and is positioned as an institution causing violent rupture.<sup>9</sup> This discussion offers a useful starting point for my analysis of Morrison’s depiction of dislocation and the strategies evolved to resist it.

Also informative is the work of the novelist and theorist Edouard Glissant. Indeed, his essays in *Caribbean Discourse* offer an insightful reading of the consequences of slavery and colonisation. Although specifically writing about Martinique, Glissant also envisions a wider configuration arising from the history of slavery, “the other America”, his ideas having bearing on the black diaspora as a whole:

The French Caribbean is the site of a history characterised by ruptures and that began with a brutal, dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Hayden, ‘Middle Passage’, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997), pp.1501-1506.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Living Memory: a meeting with Toni Morrison’, in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture*, by Paul Gilroy (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), pp.175-182 (p.178).

<sup>9</sup> See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1967) and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity Twelve Lectures*, trans. by

philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory. The negative effect of this nonhistory is therefore the erasing of the collective memory.<sup>10</sup>

Glissant's notion of nonhistory, a disjointed, disturbed or fragmented historical consciousness engendered by dislocation, relates significantly to Morrison's 'broken' modern world. It indicates not a lack of history, but a lack of a coherent or sedimented sense of the past for displaced populations.<sup>11</sup> Glissant's characterisation of the Caribbean continuum as violently disrupted echoes Morrison's reference to experiences of deracination. And such propositions of a loss of stability and connectivity are, as I will explore, played out in her fiction. In addition to their shared emphasis on destruction, both Glissant and Morrison also point towards construction. Asserting the specificity of black diaspora peoples, Glissant writes, "[t]here is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place *where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities*".<sup>12</sup> Morrison meanwhile claims above "[t]hese strategies for survival *made the truly modern person*" [my emphasis]. This dual sense of loss and creation seems to me fundamental to understanding Morrison's treatment of African American identity.<sup>13</sup>

In *Caribbean Discourse* Glissant goes on to consider the art of "the other America", finding fiction shaped by nonhistory to be distinguished by "a tortured

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Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1987). See also Habermas' discussion of Hegel, pp.23-44.

<sup>10</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp.61-2. See Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, trans. by Edward Baker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) for discussion with a Caribbean and Latin American emphasis of what Retamar terms Our America.

<sup>11</sup> Glissant sets against "the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History" the multiple and converging "histories" of the Caribbean. Glissant, p.66.

<sup>12</sup> [my emphasis] Glissant, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> The author comments elsewhere, "what Black people did in the country was brand new ... These people were very inventive, very creative, and that was a very modern situation. It was, philosophically, probably the earliest nineteenth-century modernist existence. And out of thrown things they invented everything". Toni Morrison, 'Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison', with Carolyn Denard, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 1-16 (pp.14-15).

sense of time” and obsessed with “the haunting nature of the past”.<sup>14</sup> This observation is a telling one in terms of Morrison’s often difficult and complex narrative construction and the struggles with the past in which her characters engage. The temporality that Glissant identifies, however, is also connected to space. He writes, “this exploded, suffered time is linked to ‘transferred’ space. I have in mind African space ... the ‘memory’ of which has become stamped on the spatial reality that we all live”.<sup>15</sup> This association of memory, spatiality and dislocation, as well as notions of disrupted historical consciousness, is highly suggestive for my reading of Morrison’s fiction. Indeed, my thesis will be concerned with sites both geographic and imaginary that speak to the displacements of slavery.

The final aspect of Glissant’s work to which I wish to draw attention here is his theory of cross-cultural relations and of the processes of exchange and evolution brought about by the slave trade. With his concepts of *creolité* and *antillanité*, he discredits the glorification of ‘unique’ origins, writing “[t]o assert peoples are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of ‘creolized’ that is considered as halfway between two ‘pure’ extremes”.<sup>16</sup> Rejecting interpretations of hybridity as bastardisation, Glissant identifies the potential of turning towards “the point of entanglement ... where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish”.<sup>17</sup> This mode of resistance insists on particularity while, at the same time, condemning essentialism. Glissant’s essays, in addition, relate such notions to a distinctive

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<sup>14</sup> Glissant, p.144. “Caught in the swirl of time, the American novelist dramatizes it in order to deny it better or to reconstruct it ... we do not see it stretch into our past (calmly carry us into the future) but implode in us in clumps, transported in fields of oblivion where we must, with difficulty and pain, put it all back together if we wish to make contact with ourselves and express ourselves ... what we have in common is *the irruption into modernity*”. Glissant, pp.145-6. According to Anderson, “Glissant’s writer is a *decolonizer* who, through his symbolic reclaiming of history, revalidation of suppressed cultures, and repossession of the land, restores to his people a historical and cultural identity and possibilities for the future”. Debra L. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text: Glissantian Readings in Caribbean and African-American Literatures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p.23. Glissant includes William Faulkner with other Central and South American writers who share a desire for history. See Glissant, p.147 & p.150.

<sup>15</sup> Glissant, p.145.

<sup>16</sup> Glissant, p.140.

<sup>17</sup> Glissant, p.26. According to Michael Dash, in the late sixties “Glissant advanced the theory of composite, hybrid cultures, the process of *métissage* as a notion which would replace the ideal of cultural authenticity or the obsession with origins or pure beginnings”. J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.97.

vision of the black diaspora. Invoking Brathwaite's phrase "[t]he unity is submarine", and articulating a shared experience of dislocation, he conceives of "the subterranean convergence of [Caribbean] histories". He writes, "[w]e are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship. Submarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches. We, thereby, live ... this shared process of cultural mutation".<sup>18</sup> Glissant's interpretation of rootedness is illuminating for my consideration of cultural dislocation and connection in Morrison's fiction. He as well, however, describes suggestive oceanic imagery, finding the "depths" not only to connote the losses and horrors of the Middle Passage, but also to constitute "the site of multiple converging paths".<sup>19</sup> The significance of the sea and its traversal within Morrison's imaginary is central to my proposed investigation.

Glissant's work anticipates that of Paul Gilroy, another critic who informs my reading of Morrison's novels. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* Gilroy proposes a "transcultural, international formation" based upon exchanges and circulations of various kinds across the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>20</sup> This enabling model reconceptualises Enlightenment ideas of modernity and patterns of intellectual and artistic influence whilst also emphasising the hegemonic displacements of the slave trade. Indeed, Gilroy "attempts to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African Diaspora into the Western hemisphere", positioning "capitalist, racial slavery" as "internal to modernity and intrinsically modern".<sup>21</sup> This project obviously has resonance

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<sup>18</sup> Glissant, pp.66-67

<sup>19</sup> Glissant, p.66. Glissant also quotes Derek Walcott's line "sea is history".

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Gilroy, p.17 & p.220. Although a suggestive model, it should be noted that Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* has been criticised for its failure to acknowledge alternative theories of transnationalism, its neglect of "any sustained or plausible engagement with Marxism ... the source and inspiration of the most coherent and principled theories both of the advent of capitalist modernity and of the universalising propensities and global reach (the systematicity) of capitalism as an historical formation". See Neil Lazarus, 'Is a Counterculture of Modernity a Theory of Modernity?', *Diaspora*, 4, 3 (1995), 323-339 (p.332). Despite a focus on the diaspora and transculturalism, the emphasis of Gilroy's modern world remains a western, not global, one, the absence of the "non-West" in his formulations of modernity being conspicuous. Lazarus, pp.333-4. Hence the lives of New World, slave-descended people come, by default, to represent all modern black experience. Laura Chrisman, 'Journeying to Death: Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*', *Race and Class: A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*, 39, 2 (1997), 51-65 (p.58). See also Joan Dayan,



with the observations of Morrison and Glissant discussed above.<sup>22</sup> Posing a configuration of movement, transformation, and relocation, Gilroy hopes to “provide a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of Western civilisation”.<sup>23</sup> Although he does not use the term dislocation, or indeed foreground rupture in the way that Glissant and Morrison do, Gilroy sets forth an invaluable paradigm of sea crossings.<sup>24</sup>

His theory identifies the ship as a new chronotope, or optic for imagining the black diaspora:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise ... The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion – is especially important ... Ships immediately focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts.<sup>25</sup>

This vision of oceanic traversal deliberately evokes slave-carrying vessels, but also suggests more hopeful trajectories, mapping a dynamic space of possibility and connection as well as a history of oppression. This sense of potentiality echoes that of Glissant’s discussion of creolisation. The pivotal image of ships in motion recalls that of the “[s]huttles in the rocking loom of history” of my title, whilst the conception of an Atlantic formation, “rhizomorphic [and] fractal” in structure, once more summons up Glissant’s description of submarine roots.<sup>26</sup> In a development of Glissant’s notion of extending and free floating roots, and in

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‘Paul Gilroy’s *Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 27, 4 (1996), 7-14.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Morrison’s comments about slavery and modern life were made in an interview with Gilroy himself and he chooses to rehearse them within *The Black Atlantic*. See p.221.

<sup>23</sup> Gilroy, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> Gilroy does refer to disruption in his discussion of memory, asking “[h]ow do black expressive cultures practice remembrance? ... How is this active remembrance associated with a distinctive and disjunctive temporality of the subordinated?”. Gilroy, p.212. With reference to Morrison he writes, “[h]er work points to and celebrates some of the strategies for summoning up the past devised by black writers whose minority modernism can be defined precisely through its imaginative proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding and lead back from contemporary racial violence, through lynching, towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage”. Gilroy, p.222.

<sup>25</sup> Gilroy, p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Gilroy, p.4.

accordance with his sea faring chronotope, Gilroy, however, introduces the term “routes”. This provides another useful tool for my examination of displacement within Morrison’s fiction.

Central to the thesis of *The Black Atlantic* (and its pattern of voyages) is a rejection of essentialism and a critique of rigidly nationalist approaches to culture. Gilroy writes, “[m]arked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes”.<sup>27</sup> He observes “the continuing lure of ethnic absolutisms in cultural criticism produced by both blacks and whites” and calls for work “less intimidated by and respectful of the boundaries and integrity of modern nation states than either English or African-American cultural studies have been so far”.<sup>28</sup> His proposition is that “cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective”.<sup>29</sup> Affirming, like Glissant, the significance of cross-cultural relations, Gilroy also echoes the Martinican’s emphasis on the convergence of histories. Gilroy’s configuration, however, extends beyond the Caribbean to encompass the entire Atlantic and finds in the ship a symbol that also refers back to “the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation”.<sup>30</sup> The routes and sea crossings that he invokes are thus implicated in a wider system of exchange.

Glissant’s and Gilroy’s projects are valuable to my thesis for their envisioning of the black diaspora. Glissant’s discussion of disrupted historical consciousness establishes a frame for my proposed analysis of the various forms of alienation portrayed by Morrison. His work also helps us to read her figuration of deracination and ‘rootedness’. In addition, his notion of “transferred space” is pertinent to my planned exploration of geographic dislocation. Gilroy’s theory too poses a spatial paradigm to describe his “transcultural international

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<sup>27</sup> Gilroy, p.19.

<sup>28</sup> Gilroy, pp.3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Gilroy, p.15.

formation". Indeed, the Atlantic will be key to my tracing of the journeys and symbolic gestures within Morrison's fiction that are evocative of displacement, traversal, cross-cultural influence and creolisation. My research, concerned with Morrison and the black diaspora, also finds useful Gilroy's repudiation of narrowly defined approaches to African American Studies.<sup>31</sup>

My thesis will draw on a wide range of critical resources. These include Robert Stepto's identification of narratives of 'ascent' and 'immersion' related to the North and South in black American literature and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s delineation of an African American signifying tradition with a particular investment in issues of literacy and orality. Frantz Fanon's analysis of the effects of colonisation on black identity will also inform my reading of Morrison's depiction of estrangement. In addition to the writings of Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy discussed above, W. E. B. DuBois' theory of double-consciousness will provide another means of considering dislocation. Hazel Carby's exploration of questions of race, sex and gender in early black women's writing offers a departure point for examination of Morrison's engagement with patriarchy and racist oppression. And Elaine Scarry's investigation of the body in pain will facilitate my enquiry into the novelist's efforts to confront the suffering of slavery, to speak the unspeakable. This frame of reference is enabling in its diversity and itself enacts an Atlantic world of intercultural and intercontinental exchange. I find Toni Morrison's own commentary in interviews and critical essays provocative but first and foremost my project responds to her "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful" fiction.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gilroy, p.17

<sup>31</sup> Gilroy argues that the art of "black Americans ... should not be exclusively assimilated to the project of building an ethnically particular or nationalist cultural canon, because the logic of the great political movement in which these texts stand and to which they contribute operates at other levels than those marked by national boundaries". Gilroy, p.218. Whilst it is important to describe Morrison's place within an African American literary tradition, this tradition from its very inception can be seen as the product of diverse intercontinental legacies. Consider, for example, the early models of the slave narratives. See *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment 1772-1815*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews (Washington: Civitas Counterpoint, 1998). The traditions traced by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) also defy any exclusive sense of genealogy.

<sup>32</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Black Women Writers: arguments and essays*, ed. by Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press 1985), pp.339-345 (p.345).

My thesis will concentrate on just four of Morrison's novels, namely her 'trilogy' consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, plus *Song of Solomon*.<sup>33</sup> These texts are particularly suggestive in terms of Atlantic crossings, migration, journeys and the writing of a symbolic geography. My contention that Morrison's fiction maps spatial trajectories of displacement *and* connection is borne out by them, but they also explore concomitant familial, cultural, communal and corporeal dislocations. *Beloved* and *Jazz*, in addition, present especially complex narratives which I will relate to my investigation of thematic preoccupations. My thesis is divided into four chapters, each focused on one novel. Chapters Two and Three, that discuss *Beloved* and *Jazz* respectively, are longer in length whilst Chapters One and Four on *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* are somewhat shorter.

Chapter One will address the depiction of the sites of North and South in *Song of Solomon*, relating them to various kinds of dislocation. I will trace patterns of dispossession and alienation but also reconnection within Morrison's narrative, identifying a symbolic geography that re-envision the American continent in terms of black experience. Through oppositional domestic spaces and the journey South made by Milkman Dead, the novel engages with issues of deracination and rootedness, as well as recalling the historical trajectory of the northward migration of African Americans. Also implicit in the dynamics of the text I will argue, however, is an axis of East and West. Whilst Milkman moves towards communal and cultural belonging by heading south, other gestures towards a black Atlantic are made via both allusion to an enslaved African who flew home, and the nomadism of Pilate Dead. I propose that Morrison not only revises the gender ideology of New World travel, but also exposes and renegotiates colonial relations to space through the evocation of an inscribed landscape and close engagements with it. *Song of Solomon* hence, I will claim, describes a diasporic geography threaded with roots and routes.

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<sup>33</sup> The trilogy emerged when Morrison was able to realise only part of her vision for *Beloved* in the publication of that name. Although the three novels do not work together as an explicit narrative sequence, common concerns and themes can be traced through them and together they span one hundred years of African American history.

Chapter Two will examine the portrayal of the dislocatory mechanisms and effects of slavery in *Beloved*. Through the stories of Sethe, Paul D and Stamp Paid, Morrison explores issues of race and sex, interrogating both patriarchy and racist oppression. By considering the representation of both domestic spaces and motherhood, and experiences of emasculation, I will trace the novelist's delineation of the ways in which slaves were displaced and excluded from conventional gender roles and definitions. I will suggest that the text responds to earlier narratives of slavery, in particular offering a re-visionary mode of masculinity. This chapter will also address the evocation and significance of the Middle Passage in Morrison's novel, identifying a persistent subtext of allusion to the traumatic transportation of Africans to the Americas. As well as recalling and enacting this rupture, the narrative of *Beloved* poses retentions, recoveries and rememories that describe an arc back across the Atlantic. Chapter Two will conclude with an analysis of Morrison's depiction of the corporeal damage inflicted by slavery, relating this to her text's difficult construction. I will enquire into how the author figures the unshareable nature of pain, its devastating effect on communication, and associate this with *Beloved*'s convoluted, fragmented and disrupted form. Tropes of dismemberment, I will propose, are used to play out dislocation on both bodies and discourse.

Chapter Three will consider, like Chapter One, a symbolic geography of North and South, examining Morrison's exploration of migration in *Jazz*. The site of New York City is aligned positively with modernity and a desire for posthistoricity by African American characters. Yet her portrayal of Joe and Violet Trace's disassociation and alienation, I will argue, allows the author to pose the urban North as an optic that itself gives rise to a dangerous mode of double-consciousness. Although 'down home' is associated with dispossession, the Traces have to renegotiate their relationship to the South to recover historical connection and communal belonging, and so to find a new way of living in the city. This chapter will, in addition, address *Jazz*'s use of corporeal metaphors to figure the familial displacement engendered by slavery, with particular reference to the orphanhood of Golden Gray. Whilst imagery of amputation is linked to fatherlessness in the narrative, bodily disruption, I will suggest, is also tied up with Golden Gray's confrontation of the fact of his blackness on encountering

the character of Wild. Chapter Three will conclude by claiming that the construction of the novel's unusual first person narrator signifies upon, and positions itself within, a black literary tradition concerned with issues of orality and literacy. Morrison's use of the trope of the talking book evokes a longstanding black Atlantic nexus of artistic and intellectual influence.

Chapter Four will explore the significance of the oppositional communities of Ruby and the Convent in *Paradise*. I will examine the corruption of the utopian vision of an all black town in the West, proposing that, although separatist, Ruby comes to replicate dominant national ideologies. I will address this degeneration through Morrison's preoccupation with African American military service, a theme that raises questions of black belonging and dislocation. Although the losses of Vietnam haunt her narrative, the author, I will argue, fails to engage critically with the political debate surrounding this controversial conflict. The dynamics of militarism and imperialism are, however, played out by the story of Ruby and its recourse to violence. Against the ethnic absolutism, insularity and conformism of the town the novel sets the Convent's openness and heterogeneity. To assess this alternative utopia I will consider Morrison's representation of religious worship, both Ruby's institutional Protestantism and Consolata's reinvention of life at the Convent. *Paradise*, I will suggest, re-envisions patriarchal Christianity and invokes the syncretic beliefs and practices of African Brazilian Candomblé. Thus Morrison investigates the complex evolution of black diaspora cultures in the New World, offering an affirmative paradigm of creolisation and an imaginary of intercontinental exchange.

Let me conclude my introduction by commenting briefly on the three of Morrison's novels that my project is unable to discuss at any length. These each, at least in some way, relate to the concerns of my thesis. The author's first publication, *The Bluest Eye*, which charts the tragic tale of Pecola Breedlove, a black girl who internalises dominant mythologies of beauty that idealise whiteness, introduces the themes of deracination and dismemberment. Indeed, Claudia MacTeer, in an act of resistance that counters Pecola's quest to be "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned", dismantles violently the blonde dolls that she is given every Christmas (14). Claudia's rending of a toy that she finds alien,

“patently aggressive”, is an attempt “to discover [its] dearness”, its appeal to others, yet her act rather lays bare the fetishised and racialised notions of value and beauty that it represents (14). The dismemberment that Claudia performs recalls the brutality directed towards black bodies by slavery and ensuing racist persecution while, at the same time, exploring the complex black experience of selfhood in a white dominated society. Through this episode Morrison raises issues of self-negation and estrangement to which I will return in my readings of *Beloved* and *Jazz*.

The opening of Toni Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*, meanwhile establishes a suggestive symbolic geography. The narrative begins by describing a black neighbourhood named the Bottom which originated from “[a] nigger joke” (4). According to local folklore, “[a] good white farmer” promised his slave “freedom and a piece of bottom land” in return for doing some especially difficult work (5). The master then, however, tricked the slave into accepting, not a fertile valley plot, but one high in the hills saying, “[i]t’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is” (5). Although the freedman ended up “where planting was backbreaking”, the tale of this injustice becomes a source of comfort and laughter for the African American community (5). Indeed, telling it is turned into an affirmative act of signifying for when “the town grew ... and the streets of Medallion were hot and dusty with progress”, “it was lovely up in the Bottom” (5-6). Morrison thus traces a history of black dispossession and displacement but also signals the possibility of a positive and enabling relationship to the American landscape. *Sula* hence introduces some of the themes that I will explore, in particular, in my analysis of *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, evokes the black Atlantic through its setting on the Isle des Chevaliers, a French Caribbean “island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (6). According to fishermen’s stories, “their ship foundered and sank with Frenchmen, horses and slaves aboard. The blinded slaves could not see how or where to swim so they were at the mercy of the current and the tide ... and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore” (153). This tale of a shipwreck and the devastating first sight of an American shoreline recalls the Middle Passage, the

dislocation into slavery, and suggests the sea voyages that enabled the black diaspora. The slaves' presence is a haunting one in the novel for the blind men are said to "ride those horses all over the hills" still, so giving rise to the name of the island (153). *Tar Baby* thus initiates something of the imaginary that I will explicate further in my discussion of other texts.

My thesis identifies the trope of 'dislocation' as one central to Morrison's fictional investigation of the black diaspora engendered by racial slavery. Organising my project around this term will allow me to bring together wide ranging considerations such as those of the geographical, communal, familial, cultural, and corporeal displacements that preoccupy the author's work. My understanding of dislocation also permits analysis of the disturbances that inform the construction of her novels (and therefore their reception). Taking as a starting point the author's discussion of how "modern life begins with slavery", I will interpret dislocation as evocative of the transportation of Africans to America, but as well the other disruptions and deracinations ensuing from this. Also implicit in my use of the term, however, are the trajectories of connection, the creative entanglements and relations, brought about in the New World and explored by Morrison through her depiction of African American culture and identity. Her writing, I will propose, features processes of remembering and evolution as well as those of displacement and loss. Whilst a few critics have acknowledged her engagement with diaspora, within the field of scholarship responding to Morrison's fiction, this remains an underdeveloped avenue of enquiry. Gilroy himself discusses *Beloved* along such lines, yet so far a sustained examination of Morrison's oeuvre in these terms has been lacking.<sup>34</sup> Addressing the theme and figure of dislocation in her novels, an approach enabling an ambitious and comprehensive interrogation, my thesis hopes to redress this imbalance.

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<sup>34</sup> Sally Keenan too positions *Beloved* as a diasporic text. See my previous reference, footnote 5. Yet Morrison's other novels have not been explicitly approached in this way at all.



## Chapter One - *Song of Solomon*

This chapter examines the symbolic geography of Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*. It identifies narrative concerns with dispossession and alienation, but also reconnection, and investigates how these relate to engagements with, and movements through, space. Morrison, I propose, evokes an historicised and inscribed American landscape, re-envisioning it in terms of black experience. Of particular significance are the sites of North and South, explored through the oppositional households of Macon and Pilate Dead and Milkman Dead's journey South. Also implicit in *Song of Solomon*'s imaginary, I suggest, however, are the poles of East and West. Indeed, the trajectories described by the novel not only recall migratory acts within the U.S., but also the dislocation of the Middle Passage from Africa. Morrison's text, I argue, exposes colonial relationships to land and revises the gender ideology of New World travel narratives as well as invoking a diasporic geography of roots and routes.

This chapter draws on postcolonial and feminist criticism treating issues of imperialism, landscape and / or mapping, Robert Stepto's identification of narratives of ascent and immersion and the work of Paul Gilroy and Edouard Glissant.

## I. “I do believe my whole life’s geography”: Re-Mapping the American Landscape

*Song of Solomon* tells the story of a black man’s journey from a Northern city to the Southern countryside, yet also propels readers (along with the protagonist) back through a disjointed and complex family history. It depicts various dislocations from belonging and community and raises issues of an alienated relationship to the past. The novel, in addition, however, affirms a mode of rootedness which does not necessarily demand stasis, and a sense of home achieved through close engagements with one’s environment. Brian Jarvis observes an “acute sensitivity to the politics and poetics of space” in American literature that is “accentuated in African-American writing”. This heightened sensitivity can be ascribed to African American collective experience, for “[t]he dislocations of the diaspora were followed by centuries of formal sociospatial apartheid under slavery” and modern “segregation, ghettoisation and incarceration”. To borrow Jarvis’ terms, I propose that *Song of Solomon* “constitute[s] a counter-hegemonic cartography ... that charts key spaces within the geographical experience of African-Americans”.<sup>1</sup> Morrison’s narrative, I contend, both renders traumatic displacement and its effects, and resists it through empowering trajectories of reconnection.<sup>2</sup>

The politics of place, controlling topographic inscriptions, are introduced within the first few pages of *Song of Solomon*.<sup>3</sup> An exertion of power through naming and mapping space is explored when Morrison opens her narrative in an unidentified Michigan city. Here the thoroughfare “Not Doctor Street” is revealed to have a meaningful history, a coming about that bears witness:

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p.113.

<sup>2</sup> In a rare reading that explicitly addresses the symbolic geography of Morrison’s novels Melvin Dixon writes, she “explores new physical and metaphorical landscapes in her fiction ... endows her characters with considerable mobility” and “extends the geographical imagery ... established so far in Afro-American letters”. Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.141 & p.166.

<sup>3</sup> As Alan Baker notes, “ideologies create ... landscape as a system of signification, expressive of authority”. Alan R. Baker, ‘Introduction: on ideology and landscape’, in *Ideology and Landscape in Historical Perspective Essays on the meaning of some places in the past*, ed. by A. Baker and G. Biger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.1-13 (p.5).

Town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue, but ... when [the only colored doctor in the city] moved there in 1896 his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street. Later, when other Negroes moved there, and when the postal service became a popular means of transferring messages among them, envelopes from Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia began to arrive addressed to people at house numbers on Doctor Street ... In that way, the name acquired a quasi-official status. But not for long. Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that 'Doctor Street' was never used in any official capacity. And since they knew that only Southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of town saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road fronting the lake to the junction of routes 6 and 2 leading to Pennsylvania, and also running parallel to and between Rutherford Avenue and Broadway, had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street (4).

This passage illustrates the white efforts made to prevent African Americans from claiming belonging in, asserting their own version of, the city's spaces. As Theodore Mason notes, the authorities attempt to "fix the landscape in a web of artificial abstractions" that bears "no relationship to the lives of the people of Southside".<sup>4</sup> Black residents, however, seize on this "genuinely clarifying public notice", naming the road Not Doctor Street in a delightful subversion of the legislators' intent which complies with the official decree, yet still commemorates their own pioneering doctor (4). This adept utilisation of the 'unfixable' nature of language is even extended to the street's whites-only hospital which local blacks name No Mercy Hospital. *Song of Solomon's* opening therefore not only celebrates a naming which works to circumvent and undermine official labelling and acts of dispossession, but also mocks the self-important roles and pedantic language assumed by city legislators through its gleeful narratorial tone. Here the reorganisation of landscape signifies a realignment of authority and agency. I suggest that Morrison hence asserts spaces which evade orthodox mapping and offers methods of resisting hegemonic dislocation, so introducing ideas returned to later in the novel. She,

in addition, implies a historical pattern of displacement and initiates what Craig Werner terms “the alternate naming system” of the text.<sup>5</sup>

The concerns raised here can perhaps be usefully linked to postcolonial discourses that interrogate imperialist mappings of place. Graham Huggan’s essay ‘Decolonizing the Map’, for example, delineates how cartographic “reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space ... provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power”.<sup>6</sup> Such analysis is informative for a reading of the African American spatial experience written into Morrison’s fiction. Huggan’s essay, examining how maps were / are part of the colonising process and highlighting the failure of claims to transparent mimetic representation, has direct relation to *Song of Solomon*’s reworking of ideas of geography.<sup>7</sup> Not only does the novel’s opening undermine official naming, but the narrative goes on to reconceptualise engagements with the American landscape. As demonstrated by “Mains Avenue”, “cartographic discourse ... is ... characterised by the discrepancy ... through which an approximate, subjectively reconstituted and historically contingent model of the ‘real’ world is passed off as an accurate, objectively presented and universally applicable copy”. So-called “blind spots”, or insufficiencies, in the attempt to chart a transparent reality through mimesis, however, expose the map “as a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations which, once brought to light, indicate the plurality of possible perspectives on, and the inadequacy of, any single model of the world”. Hence, I propose, Morrison’s “Not Doctor Street” can be seen as “tantamount to a decolonisation of the map”.<sup>8</sup> For the alternative naming of, and signification on, a city space reveals the legislators’

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore O. Mason, ‘The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in *Modern Critical Views Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), pp.171-188 (p.175).

<sup>5</sup> Craig Hansen Werner, *Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction since James Joyce* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p.91.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Huggan, ‘Decolonising the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection’, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.125-138 (p.125).

<sup>7</sup> Huggan considers the prevalent ironic, and/or parodic, usage of the map topos in contemporary, postcolonial literary texts, examining how this punctures the traditional “mimetic fallacy” of cartographic representation and re-envision the map itself as “the expression of a shifting ground between alternative metaphors rather than as the approximate representation of a ‘literal truth’”. Huggan, pp.131-132.

<sup>8</sup> Huggan, pp.127-129.

“mimetic fallacy”. As *Song of Solomon* proceeds the journeys it depicts further re-envision the land and the modes of its occupation, so exposing the inscriptions layered beneath dominant configurations.

Also established at the novel’s start is a symbolic geography of North and South. Robert Smith’s (suicidal) pledge to “take off ... on [his] own wings” introduces the key theme of flight (3).<sup>9</sup> Yet the salesman’s promise to reach “the other side of Lake Superior” in addition situates the city on the edge of the Great Lakes and indicates a destination further north, indeed Canada, described by Morrison elsewhere as “the historic terminus of the escape route for black people looking for asylum” (3).<sup>10</sup> Rooted in the history of U.S. slavery as a predominantly Southern institution, this comment refers to the various northward journeys towards freedom attempted by slaves and their descendents.<sup>11</sup> Such a North / South axis, I argue, is key to the author’s portrayal of black dislocation. It is also implied by the letters from “Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia” that arrive at addresses on Not Doctor Street, presumably as a result of the demographic shifts of the Great Migration (4).

In Part One of *Song of Solomon* two contrasting domestic spaces dominate Morrison’s fictional geography. According to Jarvis, “[i]n each of her novels there is a loveless house ... in which black people have isolated themselves from the tribe. These spaces are diametrically opposed to those which witness eruptions of Funk and a vital connectivity between the members of the community and their pasts”.<sup>12</sup> He thus identifies a polarity between alienation and belonging, deracination and cultural expression. Within *Song of Solomon* this opposition is exemplified by the home of Macon Dead and that of his sister, Pilate. Although both situated in the North, these two households, I suggest, are

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<sup>9</sup> The novel opens with this promise made in 1931 but most of the narrative of *Song of Solomon* describes a period in the early 1960s.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature’, in *Modern Critical Views Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), pp.201-230 (p.224).

<sup>11</sup> According to Valerie Smith, this “geographical trajectory alludes to the process of northern migration that has been a defining movement for many African-Americans”. Valerie Smith, ‘Introduction’, in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. by Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.1-17 (p.13).

<sup>12</sup> Jarvis, p.135.

associated with the sites of North and South respectively. They hence represent the larger axis of the text's organisation.

Morrison's vision of the aptly named Dead family at home is composed of Macon's "wife's narrow unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning", and "his son to whom he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism" (28). This image of domestic life is lacking in warmth, it connotes sterility and disappointment and so accords with Jarvis' description of a loveless house. Macon himself is an oppressive presence, "[s]olid, rumbling" and "likely to erupt without prior notice", causing his wife, Ruth, to experience her home on Not Doctor Street as "more prison than palace" (10). Although it signals a privileged place within black society, this residence isolates her from community. Trapped in an empty and sometimes violent marriage, living a sequestered existence, Ruth is sustained only by memories of her girlhood and her father, the celebrated Dr. Foster.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Macon keeps the whole household "awkward with fear", dominating his son and suffocating his daughters until they sit "dull[ed] ... like big baby dolls" (10).<sup>14</sup> Occupying a prestigious position within the city, Macon enjoys displaying his wealth and 'exemplary' family on weekend drives in his Packard (locally dubbed a hearse), yet his home space is not nurturing but repressive. Indeed, Morrison's representation of the Deads' domestic life illustrates what happens when

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<sup>13</sup> Her dependency upon a romanticised past is explored through the "large water mark" on a "fine mahogany table" by which she situates herself (11). Ruth looks daily for the "flaw on the splendid wood", it is "a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her ... that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside" (11). The marking signifies the emptiness of Ruth's life. It is a physical inscription, in her domestic geography, of the disjunction between her previous caring relationship with her father and the disregard she now receives from her husband: "there was nothing you could do with a mooring except acknowledge it, use it for the verification of some idea that you wanted to keep alive" (13). It thus anchors her in reality, offering some point of orientation or remembrance with which to navigate the bleak present.

<sup>14</sup> First Corinthians and Magdalene are stifled by their home lives. Paraded "like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate[d] ... like whores in Babylon", the sisters have suffered the definitions imposed on them by Macon's ambitions which require them to symbolise his social superiority through their clothes and education, but which also separate and isolate them from the rest of the local black community (216). They spend their time making artificial roses, an occupation which renders them docile, and reach middle age unfulfilled and unmarried because of their father's regime (213).

patriarchy and bourgeois aspiration supplant kinship and affection.<sup>15</sup> It thus offers an example of familial and communal dislocation.

Macon's comfort lies in not his wife or children, but the "bunchy solidity" of his ring of keys, "the keys to all the doors of his houses" (17). These he cherishes, reassured by the fact that they mark him out as "the propertied Negro who handle[s] his business so well" (20). Macon's sense of belonging is hence very much defined in terms of ownership. He conceives of land only as property to be accumulated and then rented out for profit. This materialism is also revealed through his hard-nosed policy towards Southside tenants which prompts the response "[a] nigger in business is a terrible thing to see" (22). Demonstrating the cause of his loveless and oppressive home, he advises his son, "[o]wn things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55).<sup>16</sup> His greed, but also his estranged relation to others, including his own family, clearly establishes his deracination.

Macon's greatest fear, of becoming "the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer", reveals the root of his alienation (27). His anxiety echoes Claudia MacTeer's description in *The Bluest Eye* of being put "[o]utdoors" as "the real terror of life" (11). According to Claudia, "knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred ... a hunger for property, for ownership" in African Americans (22). It is hence suggested that due to their history of displacement, the descendants of slaves seek to buy a place of belonging and security in America. Macon's dread of dispossession is associated with, in particular, his childhood experience of eviction. However, whilst for him pariahdom, which he links to a lack of ownership, is a terrifying prospect, Morrison uses his sister's life to present an alternative response to their familial past. Macon founds his sense of self and self-worth solely on his business acumen. He apprehends land merely as

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<sup>15</sup> According to Jan Furman, "[h]ating his wife ... ignoring his daughters ... and disowning his sister ... are the sum of Macon's family connections". Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p.35.

<sup>16</sup> Weinstein writes, Macon "achieve[s] ... success, and in so doing complete[s] an alienation from cultural roots that orphans those nearest [him] ... [e]nvisaging human value as a possessable thing, Macon Jr. subtly deforms all the lives that come into his domain". Philip M. Weinstein, 'David and Solomon: Fathering in Faulkner and Morrison', in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross and Judith Bryant Wittenburg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.48-74 (pp.63-64).

property whereas Pilate, I propose, exemplifies a different engagement with place.

Pilate's home space sharply contrasts with that of Macon. Indeed, spying on his estranged sister's household, Macon observes a scene of intimacy, care and communal song shared by the three generations of women who live there (see 27-30). Such affection causes Macon to remember how once Pilate "had been like his own child" whilst the music reminds him of "fields, and wild turkey and calico" (27-29). Pilate's lowly but loving home hence evokes for him their family farm near Danville, Pennsylvania. With this incidence of Macon "softening under the weight of memory", recalling an earlier way of life, the narrative gives the first indication of how he may have distorted his cultural and familial inheritance (30). The oppositional dwellings of the siblings symbolise the different paths they have chosen and also in fact broadly delineate the pattern of Milkman's ensuing quest.<sup>17</sup> For whilst the residence of Macon, which Milkman departs, is associated with bourgeois aspiration, materialism and alienation, Pilate's abode is, as I will explore, imbued with quite different values, those of belonging, reciprocity and harmony with nature, towards which the protagonist moves.

Macon and Pilate's childhood home, Lincoln's Heaven, was a rural idyll that, to some extent, recalls the American pastoral tradition. After emancipation the original Macon Dead (their father) had cleared and cultivated "ten acres of virgin wood" (250). Within sixteen years his farm was "one of the best ... in Montour County", providing an exemplar of the success to be achieved during Reconstruction (235). Indeed, the place spoke to African Americans "like a sermon":

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<sup>17</sup> At this point, according to Kimberly Benston, Macon finds himself "suspended between two radical versions of home: on the one hand, his own domain of endless accumulation ... where value is determined by agonistic dramas of force and exchange and affirmed by displays of labor's surplus effects; and, on the other hand, his sister's non-economized sphere of reciprocity, where obligation poses no threat to self-sufficiency and leisure no contradiction to meaningful production". Kimberley W. Benston, 'Re-Weaving the "Ulysses Scene": Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', in *Comparative American Identities Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. by Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.87-109 (p.89).



See what you can do? ... never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name ... this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it ... Stop picking around the edges of the world ... We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. *Nowhere else!* We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too! ... Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on (235).

The message of Lincoln's Heaven, this plot of fruitful production, thus claims a place for ex-slaves in the U.S., offering a positive paradigm for building a home in the Americas.<sup>18</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, the displacements of slavery, the farm affirms the legitimacy, indeed the necessity of carving out a site of belonging "right here". Its pastoral idealism is reinforced by the fact that Macon Dead chose to nurture his property, forging a close personal bond to the land rather than viewing it as a financial asset. In addition, although located in Pennsylvania, the homestead is symbolically associated with the Southern identity of its migrant founders who plant Georgia peaches (see 234).<sup>19</sup>

When Macon Junior recalls Lincoln's Heaven and talks of "the land that was to have been his" his speech becomes "different ... more Southern and comfortable and soft" (52). This transformation indicates that the businessman has not always been without feeling, that in fact he still cherishes the childhood home from which his family were expelled. For the legacy of Macon and Pilate's youth was disrupted and distorted. Indeed, their idyll was destroyed by local whites who, greedy for land and lumber, murdered Macon Senior and stole the farm. Orphaned and evicted, the siblings were "cut off" from belonging at an early age, losing their father and experiencing a dispossession emblematic of a

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<sup>18</sup> The "sermon" is emphasised in Morrison's text by the rhetoric of a preaching call, as the third person narrative, using the farm itself as a focalizer, vehemently exhorts African Americans to shape the land in a manner reminiscent of Baby Suggs' command to love black flesh in *Beloved*.

<sup>19</sup> Macon Dead and his wife moved North to settle, so reflecting the "collective experience of nearly four-million African Americans who left the South between Reconstruction and World War II and migrated ... North in what is historically referred to as 'The Great Migration'". Carolyn Denard, 'Toni Morrison and the American South: Introduction', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), i-vii (p.i).

wider pattern of African American displacement (141). Whilst Macon remembers a felicitous landscape, he also cannot forget its tragic loss.<sup>20</sup>

The violent dislocation undergone by the brother and sister is demonstrated and enacted formally. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison employs a third person narrative and multiple narrative focalizers.<sup>21</sup> Whilst presenting the siblings' points of view the novel signals rupture. For example, when Pilate fondly recalls cooking a pie for her brother as a child, the focus of her narrative switches swiftly and bluntly to how they blew her papa "five feet up into the air" (40). Later when Macon remembers working "right alongside" his father during boyhood, the pastoral scene that he envisions is shattered by an image of how at his death the pioneering farmer lay "twitching in the dirt" (51). Lastly, when Milkman travels back to Danville and learns of local mythologising of Lincoln's Heaven, Morrison's narrative jolts readers by puncturing the third person reverie, suddenly stating, "[b]ut they shot the top of [Macon's] head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches" (235). This composition creates a jarring effect that echoes the shock experienced by the Dead children.

Following his dispossession Macon Junior adopted the value of ownership promoted by his father's farm. Whereas Lincoln's Heaven, however, affirmed claiming your own place, building a home, Macon distorted this legacy, becoming concerned solely with property and social status.<sup>22</sup> His land is not tended in order to yield a harvest, but accumulated and then rented out in a way

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<sup>20</sup> Following their orphanage the siblings were estranged, leading Macon to later condemn Pilate as treacherous and disreputable. Their differences can be traced back to an encounter that occurred when they hid in the woods having fled their family home. In a cave the children were confronted by a "very old, very white" man whom Macon, "thinking ... of how his father's body had twitched and danced for whole minutes in the dirt", violently attacked, stabbing him until he stopped moving (169-170). This shocking episode marked the siblings' separation as, on finding the white man's stash of gold, Pilate wished to leave the money whilst Macon saw "[l]ife, safety, and luxury" fan out "before him like the tail-spread of a peacock" (170). His material ambitions, his association of money with security, prompted Macon to build his fortune and social position in Michigan. Meanwhile Pilate began a vagrant life untrammelled by possessions. She retained a sense of connection to family despite her wanderings whilst Macon invested only in his dead plots.

<sup>21</sup> I use Rimmon-Kenan's term focalization. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp.71-3.

<sup>22</sup> Denise Heinze too perceives that his twisted "happiness is derived not from the fruits of his own labor, but from ownership of things and people, including his family". Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of 'Double-Consciousness': Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.83.

that offers only financial rewards. Macon thus comes to see space as an asset in much the same way as the white men who shot his father. Having lost familial connection and his home as a boy, Macon's vision of what Lincoln's Heaven meant is corrupted. His hunger for acquiring land presents just one example of the deracination that Morrison's fiction shows to be engendered by racial and economic oppression. As Jarvis notes, however, "[w]hilst Macon's response is to learn the language of the oppressor, Pilate moves in the opposite direction ... she develops a passionate interest in geography and a radically different relation to place than that pursued by her brother".<sup>23</sup> Indeed, I suggest that in Pilate's home Morrison depicts an idealised, 'rooted' way of life that is increasingly associated with the South. In the symbolic geography of *Song of Solomon* her space is opposed to those of Macon's Northern self-interest (emblematised by his keys).

Like Macon, Pilate grew up in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. Yet, unlike him, she is said to have been "born wild" and, when their father is shot, formulates her own way of responding to the ensuing displacement from familial belonging (166). Indeed, since delivering herself at birth Pilate has been marked out as different, a fact signalled by the oddity of "her stomach ... at no place interrupted by a navel" (27). Whilst some critics have read this physical condition as a sign of negation, I propose rather that it symbolises her positive lack of dependence on others, her self-sufficiency.<sup>24</sup> When expelled from Lincoln's Heaven, Pilate forges her own portable sense of home by taking with her her name, copied from the Bible by her father, and her mother's snuffbox. Having these tokens of remembrance fashioned into an earring, she carries them

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<sup>23</sup> Jarvis, p.122. Morrison has commented on the significance of "the difference between what each took from their father, the owner of this beautiful, luxurious farm". "Macon Dead the second ... took from that situation his grief over the loss of his father and his farm – he took from it his obsession for acquiring things. His way of expressing his total devastation was to duplicate what he believed was important from that wonderful farm. He didn't take the love, he took only ... the notion of acquiring property ... Pilate, what she took from that farm was her love of nature. Her remembrance of an affectionate father, a doting brother, love, that wildness, that communion with and total reliance on her own instincts ... So they went in two different ways". Toni Morrison, 'Interview with Toni Morrison', with Ntozake Shange, *The American Rag*, November 1978, 48-52 (p.49).

<sup>24</sup> See Lucinda H. MacKethan, 'The Grandfather Clause reading the Legacy from 'The Bear' to *Song of Solomon*', in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross and Judith Bryant (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.99-115 (p.101).

around, wears them, as part of herself. Hence, despite her orphanage, for Pilate her parents remain a constant presence.<sup>25</sup> Unlike other displaced characters, she defines her own position: she “knows ... her own name and everybody else’s” (89).<sup>26</sup>

Whilst after their separation Macon headed North in search of wealth, his sister, only twelve, set out for Virginia, motivated by a wish to track down her extended family, to recover connection after dislocation. During the course of her travels she picked up a little schooling (loving “the geography part” best) and learnt root work and other skills from the migrant communities that she joined (141). Indeed, Pilate roamed all over the States, developing a deep affinity with the land and the natural world. Because of her physical abnormality she remained isolated from “partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion”, yet refused to be circumscribed by her pariahdom (148). Resourceful and independent, she “threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero”, determining “how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her” (149). Disregarding social conventions and collecting a rock as a “souvenir” from each place that she visits, Pilate becomes a female hobo and pioneer (142). Through intimacy with the earth and connection to her past, she forges a form of belonging that has nothing to do with ownership.

Pilate finally finds a home, but not “her people”, with a “colony of Negro farmers on an island off the coast” of Virginia (146-7). This location on the edge of America is suggestive in terms of the symbolic geography of Morrison’s text for it is the closest site to Africa visited in the novel, a point to which I will

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<sup>25</sup> Marianne Hirsch writes, “[w]hen she pierces her own flesh with the earring which ... contains her name, she repairs the absence of relation that has failed to mark her body”. Marianne Hirsch, ‘Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. by Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), pp.69-92 (p.86). As Barbara Rigney observes, she carries the “written inscription” of her name, “not because her identity as an individual is threatened, but because the name itself is a connection with family, with tradition and history ... to provide continuity in an otherwise random and dispossessed existence”. Barbara Hill Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p.42.

<sup>26</sup> Named by Macon Senior for the shape of the letters in “Pilate”, which he saw as “[s]trong and handsome” with “a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees”, she is aligned with the natural world and unorthodox modes of understanding for her name is read as a pictograph rather than through its Biblical associations (18).

return. Yet even after starting a family, Pilate remains restless: “It was as if her geography book had marked her to roam the country, planting her feet in each pink, yellow, blue, or green state” (148). Indeed, she continues her wandering for over twenty years, defining her own relationship to the American continent and leading Brenner to claim that “her odyssey ... makes child’s play of Milkman’s journeys”.<sup>27</sup> On her travels Pilate not only remembers every place that she visits by collecting a piece of it, but also sets up an alternative mapping that defies the demarcations of her school atlas and affirms a geography of independent exploration, vagrant work, close personal engagement with the land, and, above all else, self-definition and orientation in the world around her.

Even when she settles in the same city as Macon, Pilate’s way of life continues to contrast with his materialism and bourgeois ambition. She works as a “natural healer” and “small-time bootlegger”, so finding a flexible way to support herself, and runs an informal household without electricity, gas or running water (150). Hence her dwelling offers what Benston terms a “frontier culture”.<sup>28</sup> To her brother this refusal of modern domestic conveniences appears backward, her occupation disreputable. Yet although her home is spare and unregulated, one in which “[n]o meal was ever planned or balanced or served”, it is a loving and egalitarian shelter full of hospitality and music (29). It is also positively allied with the natural world, containing harvests of berries and nuts, surrounded by trees and full of air and light from its many windows.<sup>29</sup> This association reveals Pilate’s means of subsisting in her environment to be non-exploitative.

Despite her nomadism, Pilate possesses a greater sense of rootedness than her more sedentary brother. She is close to her daughter and granddaughter and has informative visions of her dead father which demonstrate ancestral connection.

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Brenner, ‘*Song of Solomon*: Rejecting Rank’s Monomyth and Feminism’, in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1988), pp.114-125 (p.121).

<sup>28</sup> Benston, p.99.

<sup>29</sup> Mickelson writes, “[Pilate’s] deepest affinities are with the natural world, and any detail of domesticity in connection with her only serves to deepen the image of union with nature”. Anne Z. Mickelson, *Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), p.136.

Indeed, she understands the value of history, often acting as a “culture bearer”.<sup>30</sup> Pilate even returns to collect the remains of the white man murdered in a cave in Danville for she believes that “[y]ou just can’t fly on off and leave a body”, should carry the past with you (147). Whilst Macon’s ruthlessness in business and bleak home space indicate his deracination, the symbolic association of Pilate and her house with Africa signals hers to be an affirmative model of blackness. As noted by Ashley Tidey, the visitations of her father are akin to African “ancestor communion”.<sup>31</sup> And her home is described as having a “heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets”, that “could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra” (184-185). Whilst Pilate is a somewhat romanticised figure, the alignment of her with both the South and Africa plays an important part in the spatial imaginary of *Song of Solomon*.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Glissant’s analogy for his vision of a cross-cultural relationship, “[s]ubmarine roots ... floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions”, is suggestive in terms of Pilate’s mode of belonging.<sup>33</sup> This involves awareness of familial history and an empowering notion of origins, but also mobility and openness, the ability to sustain herself without a narrowly defined base or root. Macon tells Milkman “[i]f you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate” (54). Indeed, she embodies cultural connection to a homeland from before slavery whilst, at the same time, engaging in communion with, and grounding herself firmly in, the American landscape. Pilate’s African Americanness thus operates as a complex sign within *Song of Solomon*’s cartographic project.

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<sup>30</sup> “Someone whose primary function is to sustain the durable human values of the past”. Brenner, p.121.

<sup>31</sup> Ashley Tidey, ‘Limping or Flying? Psychoanalysis, Afrocentrism, and *Song of Solomon*’, *College English*, 63, 1 (2000), 48-70 (p.52).

<sup>32</sup> Wilentz suggests that, like the woman in yellow in *Tar Baby*, she “has all the qualities Morrison associates with an ideal African woman: she has stature, strength” and “presence”. Gay Wilentz, ‘Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp.109-133 (p.116). Of Pilate’s seduction the author has commented “[s]he doesn’t speak very much ... she doesn’t have the dialogue the other people have. I had to do that, otherwise she was going to overwhelm everybody. She got terribly interesting ... I had to take it back. It’s *my* book; it’s not called *Pilate*”. Toni Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, *The Paris Review*, 35, 128 (1993), 82-125 (p.106).

<sup>33</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p.67.

Pilate also influences significantly the life of her nephew, Milkman. She welcomes him into her home, feeds him, tells him family stories, rescues him from the police and provides her very self to him as somewhere “intimate, familiar, like a room that he lived in, a place where he belonged” (210).<sup>34</sup> Pilate hence offers Milkman, trapped by the “stultifying middle-class repression that renders [him] marginal and homeless”, a space of rootedness, community, affirmation.<sup>35</sup> Although Macon tells his son “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world”, she proves to be key to Milkman’s development, functioning as a mentor and guide (55). She “show[s] him the sky, the blue of it”, so awakening his dulled imagination, and her world of distinctive smells, tastes and visions, stimulates his deadened senses (209). Pilate also represents an ancestor who, unlike Macon, can provide a link back to previous places of belonging. As I will explore, as a ‘pilot’ she enables the protagonist to navigate the passages before him.<sup>36</sup>

Despite Pilate’s importance, *Song of Solomon* treats predominantly male, rather than female, experiences. Indeed, Morrison describes this focus thus: “I created a male world and inhabited it and it had this quest – a journey from stupidity to epiphany, of a man, a complete man”.<sup>37</sup> Such commentary indicates the novel’s

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, she saves him even before birth by using an obeah-style doll to stop Macon from inducing a miscarriage (see 132).

<sup>35</sup> Dixon, p.160.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison’s depiction of Pilate’s way of life, however, is not entirely positive as it is shown to fail her granddaughter. Unlike Pilate, Hagar is “[n]ot strong enough ... to make up [herself]” and, raised in a carefree, isolated household, lacked what “she needed, what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday schoolteachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her - and the humour with which to live it” (307). This loss is at least partly due to Pilate’s pariahdom. Indeed, Morrison discusses Hagar’s tragedy in terms of the absence of men (perhaps male kin like Macon?) in her life “in a nourishing way”. Toni Morrison, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’, in *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews* ed. by Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1983), pp.339-345 (p.344). Ironically the “totally uncontent and supportive love” offered to Hagar by Pilate and Reba “may have taken from her the development of the strength she needed to survive Milkman’s abandoning of her”. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, ‘The Interdependence of Men’s and Women’s Individuation’, in *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*, by Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp.85-99 (p.97). For when he ends their fourteen-year relationship Hagar loses her mind. Absorbing the values of a consumer culture that affirms a white ideal of beauty, she despises herself, eventually descending into illness and death.

<sup>37</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’, in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. by William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp.85-102 (p.102). “In *Song of Solomon* it was the first time that I had written about a man who was the central, the driving engine of the narrative ... the image in my mind was a train. All the previous books have been

preoccupation with the educative journey of its protagonist, Milkman Dead. As I will next explore, his quest involves significant engagements with landscape and enables Morrison to set forth spatial trajectories of dislocation and connection.

As an infant Milkman dreamt of flight yet, on finding “that only birds and airplanes could fly”, he lost all ambition, his imagination becoming “so bereft that he appeared dull” (9). His disinterest in, and limited perspective of, his own environment is signalled early on by the circumscribed view from his place in the family car: Milkman is described as “flying blind” (32). Lacking in direction, even as an adult he finds himself “tentative ... like a man peeping around a corner ... trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back” (69-70). His sense of inadequacy is illustrated by the way in which he experiences his slight limp as a “burning defect” (62). A product of Macon Dead’s privileged yet oppressive household, Milkman’s life is “pointless, aimless ... There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for” (107). Even on the one occasion when he protects his mother from Macon, Milkman then retreats from the “infinite possibilities” and the “enormous responsibilities” that are opened up on challenging his father (68). He remains disconnected, or “disassociated”, from his family and immune to the concerns of the wider African American community (74). Hence, on beginning his quest, Milkman is represented as self-centred, alienated and blinkered.<sup>38</sup>

The protagonist’s friendship with Guitar Bains furthers Morrison’s exploration of black manhood. For Guitar provides a useful foil to Milkman and his ignorance. Unlike Milkman who has always lived on Not Doctor Street, Guitar spent his youth hunting in the woods of Florida, able to “hear anything, smell anything, and see like a cat” (85). This positive Southern legacy, however, was disrupted when his father was killed and the remaining family moved to Michigan. Not only did Guitar have to cope with the transition to a Northern

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women-centred, and they have been pretty much in the neighborhood and in the yard; this was going to move out. So, I had this feeling about a train ... sort of revving up, then moving out as he does, and then it sort of highballs at the end ... and leaves you ... suspended”. Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, p.116.

<sup>38</sup> Morrison explains, “I had to start with this person who doesn’t know anything ... He’s selfish, self-centred, spoiled, feels no commitment to anybody”. Morrison, ‘Interview’, with Shange, p.49.



city, but he was also scarred by his father's violent death. For, involved in a sawmill accident, the labourer was literally sliced in two and then buried in "halves, not even fitted together" but "placed cut side down, skin side up, in the coffin. Facing each other" (224). This image of division, depicted in disturbingly physical terms, rends ideas of bodily wholeness and self-integrity, perhaps symbolising what is enacted upon African Americans by a white hegemonic environment.<sup>39</sup> Guitar is haunted by the vision of a grotesquely dismembered human form and feels nausea whenever reminded of the forty dollars offered by the white boss "who was responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity" (224). The "big peppermint stick" that Guitar's mother gave him at the funeral hence remained uneaten, a "bone-white and blood-red" candy, eerily reminiscent of an amputated limb and tasting of a sweetness that he will always associate with racist mistreatment (225).

*Song of Solomon* sets Guitar's political awareness against Milkman's apathy. Their differences are illustrated by the "Honoré versus Alabama" debate about the ethics of building holiday resorts for the few propertied and privileged blacks in the North given the poverty and disadvantage of African Americans in the rural South (114).<sup>40</sup> Unlike Milkman, Guitar, who is working class and rents one of Macon Dead's houses on the wrong side of town, is familiar with his own subject position within a racist U.S. He also comprehends oppression as a global issue, recognising the exploitation of "black men" picking tea in India as connected to that of cotton plantation workers in the American South (114). Guitar links geography to racial politics, commenting sarcastically on how the French like "brown eggs" (the products of racial miscegenation) "[i]n France ...

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<sup>39</sup> According to Marianne Hirsch, the corpse acts as one of the "objective correlatives" of the text, "as [an] incarnation of the contradictory familial images the novel develops", its potency lingering as readers come to see that "the black man's parts never fit; his body does not stay buried". Hirsch, pp.81-82. As Jill Matus points out, the "Bains' father dies from traumatic amputation ... in an accident that exposes the exploitation of 'colored' workers in unsafe working conditions". Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.76.

<sup>40</sup> Guitar proclaims to Milkman "I do believe my whole life's geography ... For example, I live in the North now. So the first question that comes to mind is North of what? Why, North of the South. So the North exists because the South does" (114). His speech echoes W. E. B. DuBois' description of Atlanta as a site of contradiction: "South of the North, yet North of the South". W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p.65.

[b]ut not in the Congo” (116).<sup>41</sup> His discourse exposes the hypocrisies of colonisation, exoticisation and racism, revealing a well developed and politicised conception of the world. This serves to highlight Milkman’s limitations prior to his quest. Yet Guitar’s experiences, the abuses he has suffered, not only make him alert to injustice, but also fill him with hatred and anger. This leads to his involvement in a vigilante group bent on taking retribution for the murder of African Americans. Guitar’s Southern hunting skills are turned to use against whites and eventually also Milkman, a fellow black. He hence becomes “divided against himself rather like his father”: his political consciousness is warped whilst Morrison’s protagonist grows in perception and awareness.<sup>42</sup>

Aiming to recover the gold that Macon and Pilate found as children, Milkman seizes a chance to make “tracks out of the city, far away from Not Doctor Street” (180). He thus begins his journey with the wish “to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present” (180). This indicates Macon and Ruth’s impasse, their arrested relationship to a shared marital history. Yet, despite his attempt to break away, Milkman’s desire for gold does nothing if not emulate and echo his father’s own greed. He seeks “a clean-lined definite self”, believing that to achieve this he must close the door on his home and family (69).<sup>43</sup> The quest on which he embarks, however, brings him to old, rather than “[n]ew people” and “places” (180). Hence Lubiano writes, “Milkman’s journey forward to flight is a journey into his past”.<sup>44</sup> Heading South, the protagonist, I argue, moves towards historical connection and a form of freedom and selfhood very different to that he at first envisions.

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<sup>41</sup> “Frenchmen in the Congo won’t touch a brown egg ... Might do something to his skin. Like the sun”, for French people only love the sun “[o]n the Riviera ... In the Congo they hate the sun” (116).

<sup>42</sup> Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1995), p.73.

<sup>43</sup> His departure is marked symbolically at the end of Part One of the novel when he firmly closes the door to his sister’s room behind him, Lena having just condemned his selfishness and his disregard for the women of the family which makes him “exactly like” Macon (215). This leaving hence accords with the “accepted tenet of American gender myths that men find their freedom and individuality by escaping the constraints of society, which are represented by women”. Linda Krumholz, ‘Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39, 3 & 4 (1993), 551-574 (p.555).

<sup>44</sup> Wahneema Lubiano, ‘The Postmodernist Rag: Political Identity and the Vernacular in *Song of Solomon*’, in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. by Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.93-116 (p.111).

In Susan Willis' essay examining the three concerns of community, journey and sexuality in fiction by black women, Morrison, among other authors, is said to treat travel as a means of attaining self-knowledge through re-entry into collective historical experience, itself defined by the voyages from Africa into slavery, and from the American rural South to the urban North.<sup>45</sup> Willis posits the journey as having always been "central to black women writers" and sees contemporary texts as exploring "the journey back into history, reversing the migration of Afro-Americans from South to North" and enacting "the retrieval of the collective past".

Journey in ... novels by black women is not just a structuring device upon which the author might conveniently string the incidents of the plot. Rather, the notion of travelling through space is integral to the unfolding of history and the development of the individual's consciousness with regard to the past. The voyage over geographic space is [therefore] an expanded metaphor for the process of one person's coming to know who [he/]she is.

This analysis is highly suggestive for my reading of *Song of Solomon*. Willis identifies journeys 'back' that retrace the dynamics of past migrations as well as preoccupations with historical reconnection and the need for it. She also describes the journey as a "highly physical means to understanding", associating learning with engagements with landscape through travel.<sup>46</sup> Before I turn to examining Milkman's quest, however, consideration of Robert Stepto's work on narratives of ascent and immersion which predates Willis' essay, is necessary.

In his 1979 attempt to identify and classify the markers of a black literary tradition, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Stepto finds that "the Afro-American pregeneric myth of the quest for freedom and literacy has occasioned two basic types of narrative expressions".<sup>47</sup> Examining Nineteenth Century slave narratives and other black authored publications of the early Twentieth Century, he locates a useful symbolic geography. Firstly Stepto describes a pattern of "ascent" which "launches an 'enslaved' and semi-literate

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Willis, 'Black Women Writers: taking a critical perspective', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.211-237 (p.211).

<sup>46</sup> Willis, pp.219-222.

<sup>47</sup> Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p.167.

figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North". Although so achieving liberty, this voyager "must be willing to forsake familial or communal postures in the narrative's most oppressive structure for a new posture [of alienation] in the least oppressive environment". This then gives rise to a narrative of "immersion" within the tradition, "a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, [through] which the protagonist seeks ... tribal literacy". Here the questing figure "must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative's least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity".<sup>48</sup> Stepto's delineation of such tropes invests the urban North with freedom and mobility, but also alienation, whereas the South is plotted as a site of both communal belonging and racist oppression. As he finds early black narratives to chart journeys North out of slavery, so he discovers texts such as W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* to trace movements 'back' that attempt to reverse the losses of migration. Whilst, as a contemporary novel, *Song of Solomon* might appear to accord with Willis' paradigm of travel enacting the retrieval of collective history, Milkman's quest can also be read as a narrative of immersion. His is a journey from Northern disassociation after the migration of previous generations, to Southern connectivity. As Craig Werner points out, however, Stepto's North / South polarity suggests "that black experience originates in slavery" and leaves little option but the repetition of "the cycle of ascent and immersion".<sup>49</sup> I propose that Morrison's text moves beyond such limitations. Indeed, her symbolic geography charts new trajectories, aligns Southern identity with mobility and revises the gender ideology implicit in many travel narratives.

Part Two of *Song of Solomon* describes the protagonist's rite of passage into the world beyond Not Doctor Street and so constitutes a kind of Bildungsroman.<sup>50</sup> On leaving Michigan Milkman becomes part of what

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<sup>48</sup> Stepto, p.167.

<sup>49</sup> Craig Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p.291.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, "*Song of Solomon* has most often been read as an initiation novel of mythic quest in which the male protagonist ... must come to terms with his personal and collective history to achieve a sense of identity". Marilyn Sanders Mobley, 'Call and Response: Voice, Community,

Morrison has termed “the travelling Ulysses scene” which enables African American men to invent themselves in the process of “going from ... place to place”.<sup>51</sup> In accordance with conventional quest narratives, he breaks familial ties and embarks on an educative journey. Yet, in the case of Morrison’s novel, this leads to, not just communal reintegration, but also a trail back through ancestral history and previous places of belonging. In addition, rather than merely passing a scenic backdrop on his travels, Milkman encounters what has been termed Morrison’s “ideological geography”.<sup>52</sup> The structure of the narrative itself contrasts the protagonist’s home city with the places that he visits. The shift between Parts One and Two thus allows the author to emphasise the distinct nature of the landscape in which Milkman learns about his familial past and, through this process, himself evolves. Indeed, as he moves southwards he enters what Jarvis calls an “enchanted region of woods, wilderness and secret caves” and begins to embrace legacies from beyond Macon’s material world.<sup>53</sup>

The first of *Song of Solomon*’s two sections is devoted to building up a picture of the Dead family in the urban North. The narrative, which employs multiple focalizers, however, is interspersed with flashes back to earlier events and different locations, as characters remember their pasts. Part Two of the novel sets readers, and Milkman, off on a journey that turns South. This transition is dislocatory as the text moves abruptly from the fixed locale of a Northern city and ‘realist’ description of Macon’s household to the fantastical encounters that take place on Milkman’s trip through the American wilderness, related in a somewhat surreal style. With this formal device Morrison displaces readers, along with her protagonist, from the environment or setting to which we have become accustomed, pushing us on a voyage that calls into question all knowledge accrued so far. Indeed, according to Linda Krumholz, the second section of the narrative makes greater demands on the reader’s imagination with its mythical allusions and otherworldly experiences: “[i]n part two the move to

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and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. by Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.41-68 (p.41).

<sup>51</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, with Robert Stepto, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp.10-29 (pp.25-26).

<sup>52</sup> Peach, p.64.

<sup>53</sup> Jarvis, p.122.

the southern rural African-American folk culture is represented by a heightening of natural perception, a richness of symbolism, and the supernatural presence of ... spirits that bring Milkman and the reader 'beyond the veil' of the traditionally rational and empirical Euro-American discourse to an inspired and visionary African-American discourse. Although Pilate is absent through most of this section, this is her terrain".<sup>54</sup> The landscapes of Milkman's quest hence assume great significance. Indeed, her symbolic geography permits Morrison to explore the implications of various migratory acts and "the familial, cultural, and mythic meanings of the South in Black life".<sup>55</sup>

In a prelude to the protagonist's departure, the narrative makes explicit reference to the topography of North America:

Truly landlocked people know they are. Know the occasional Bitter Creek or Powder River that runs though Wyoming; that the large tidy Salt Lake of Utah is all they have of the sea and that they must content themselves with *bank*, *shore*, and *beach* because they cannot claim a coast ... But the people living in the Great Lakes region are confused by their place on the country's edge - an edge that is border but not coast. They seem to be able to live a long time believing, as coastal people do, that they are at the frontier where final exit and total escape are the only journeys left. But those five Great Lakes which the St. Lawrence feeds with memories of the sea are themselves landlocked, in spite of the wandering river that connects them to the Atlantic. Once the people of the lake region discover this, the longing to leave becomes acute (162).

Here attention is drawn to the position of Michigan on the Northern periphery of the U.S. The passage also establishes the coast and "memories of the sea" to be central to ideas of escapism and flight. Of course the urge to fly away is immediately relevant to Milkman's wish to break free. Yet it also has wider significance within the novel in terms of Robert Smith's desire to escape over Lake Superior mentioned earlier, and the ancestral journey back across the water that Milkman later discovers. Indeed, in this evocation of geography Morrison anticipates some of the trajectories that the protagonist will go on to trace. Her discourse thus both subtly suggests a spatial imaginary and refers to the names of

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<sup>54</sup> Krumholz, pp.567-568.

<sup>55</sup> Denard, 'Introduction', p.iv.

real rivers, lakes and states, so situating the narrative. The Atlantic Ocean is, in addition, associated with “connect[ion]”, rather than breach or closure.

Milkman begins his quest imbued with Macon’s teaching that “[m]oney is freedom ... The only real freedom there is” (163). He accordingly sets off by plane, a luxurious mode of transport which “encourage[s] illusion and a feeling of invulnerability ... sitting in intricate metal becoming glistening bird” (220). Although the protagonist embarks on this journey in order to leave behind his troubled family, he hence remains very much accompanied by the privilege which his father’s wealth buys him. To reach Danville, Pennsylvania, however, he has to adopt more lowly means and, as Linden Peach suggests, the fact that Milkman travels by plane, bus and then foot is “emblematic of the way in which he sheds layers of his former cultural identity”.<sup>56</sup> Once on the road Milkman tries to “enjoy the scenery running past his window” but “the city man’s boredom with nature’s repetition” overtakes him: “[s]ome places had lots of trees, some did not; some fields were green, some were not, and the hills in the distance were like hills in every distance” (226). To Milkman the landscape is all just “uneventful countryside” which he doesn’t appreciate and can’t read (227). Until he is engaged more closely with his environment he will remain unable to understand that the land does not just provide undifferentiated scenery, but constitutes a topography inscribed with inhabitation and history.

Morrison frames Milkman’s initial disorientation and helplessness in the rural backwoods of America, exposed once he is deprived of familiar landmarks and advantages, with what Samuel Allen terms her “imaginative use of myth and folklore”.<sup>57</sup> Part Two of the novel hence begins with reference to the story of Hansel and Gretel. With “their parents, chastened and grieving ... far away”, these two lost children “ran ... to the house where a woman older than death lived”, believing their “hunger [was] about to be assuaged” (219). Milkman’s position, far from home, greedy for gold and “oblivious to the universe of wood life around him”, is likened to that of Hansel and Gretel (219). This allusion,

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<sup>56</sup> Peach, p.59.

<sup>57</sup> Samuel Allen, ‘Review of *Song of Solomon*’, in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1988), pp.30-32 (p.31).

however, signals his immaturity and alienation for the protagonist's visit to a (gingerbread) house in the forest follows a quite different plot.<sup>58</sup> Whilst on entering the decaying Butler mansion Milkman expects to meet a witch, instead he has a helpful, if strange encounter with the wise woman Circe. Although already ancient when Macon and Pilate were young, she improbably is alive still, this fact lending the episode surreality and illustrating how Morrison blends "acceptance of the supernatural [with] a profound rootedness in the real world".<sup>59</sup> The figure of Circe is associated with magic and enticement, yet her interview with Milkman proves instructive and enlightening.<sup>60</sup> Her mission of ensuring the destruction of her former employers' home, in addition, evokes a Southern history of the big house (see 246-7). Advised by Circe on how to listen to people, stories of Lincoln's Heaven that "he'd heard many times before" become real to Milkman in Danville (231). Her remonstrance, "[y]our ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain", indicates his inattentiveness thus far and shapes his future relationship to the voices around him (247). Indeed, a new ability to listen and observe is key to the development of his quest.

Milkman learns further lessons when, following Circe's directions, he sets out to visit the woodland cave that once contained gold. Deceived by the sound of water, erring in his calculation of the route and incompetent in his fording of a creek, the protagonist ends up soaked, exhausted, sore footed and lost. He finds the terrain of Montour Ridge difficult to cross in his city shoes, realises that locals have a very "different ... concept of distance", and sees the forest as a threatening "green maw" (238). He "had no idea that simply walking through trees, bushes, on untrammelled ground could be so hard" for "[w]oods always

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<sup>58</sup> Morrison explains, "[t]he choice of a tale or of folklore in my work is tailored to the character's thoughts or actions in a way that flags him or her and provides irony, sometimes humor. Milkman, about to meet the oldest Black woman in the world, the mother of mothers who has spent her life caring for helpless others, enters her house thinking of a European tale, Hansel and Gretel, a story about parents who abandon their children to a forest and a witch who makes a diet of them. His confusion at that point, his racial and cultural ignorance, is flagged". Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing', *Thought: A Review of Culture and Writing*, 59, 235 (1984), 385-390 (p.387). The use of the Hansel and Gretel tale might also allude to Macon and Pilate who sought refuge with Circe after the death of their father. Yet when the siblings first approached the house it was the white owners, the Butlers, whom they had to fear, rather than the 'witch', Circe, who helped, hid and fed the children.

<sup>59</sup> Morrison, 'Rootedness', p.342.



brought to his mind City Park, the tended woods on Honoré Island ... where tiny convenient paths led you through" (250). The difficulties Milkman encounters confuse his sense of space and impede his mobility, requiring him to adapt in order to navigate the wild landscape. Still, drawn by the "Las Vegas" smell of money, he does reach his destination, eventually learning to leave "off thinking and let his body do the work" (251). In the cave Milkman not only discovers that the gold has gone, but also recklessly disturbs the resident bat population. His sense of disappointment and incompetence is compounded when he returns to "[m]acadam, automobiles, fence posts, civilisation" but still misreads his environment, offending a local by offering to pay for a hitched lift, making himself sick on hamburgers, and neglecting to thank his Danville host (253). Morrison thus explores Milkman's clumsy negotiation of the world outside Not Doctor Street, his lack of affinity with the land. Yet her narrative also indicates that his re-education has begun as he now realises that "[t]he low hills in the distance" are "real places" rather than just "scenery" (257).

When he follows Pilate's "tracks", heading towards Virginia, the significance of Milkman's trajectory becomes evident (258). His journey southwards, retracing his family's previous movements, resonates with the arc described in Stepto's narrative of immersion and Willis' identification of voyages reversing South to North migration. Gay Wilentz suggests that his destination, "[t]he American South, in spite of its iniquitous history of racial segregation and slavery has become ... a source of heritage, one's familial home ... the fact remains that this is where Afro-America began and where the relationship to one's African roots is the strongest".<sup>61</sup> She hence positions the South positively as a site symbolising belonging for African Americans, a location perceived as closer to Africa than the rest of America, yet also the place where the peoples and cultures of these two continents were irrevocably joined. In addition, Wilentz proposes that for recent black women authors "who centre healing experiences and awareness of one's heritage in Southern coastal regions,

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<sup>60</sup> Her voice should, according to the epic tradition, prove to be a "dreaded snare", however, here Circe's "gift is not that of a meaningless sexual immorality but rather a sage, even epiphanic historicity". Benston, p.96 & p.102.

<sup>61</sup> Wilentz, p.124. Denard writes, "the South ... was transformed from a site of 'exile' to a site of 'home' when Blacks migrated North". Denard, 'Introduction', p.vi.

movement south reaffirms a connection to the African diaspora”.<sup>62</sup> This geographical schema is useful for my reading of the poles of North and South in *Song of Solomon*. Yet Morrison, I propose, offers an extended and complex exploration of relationships to the land and introduces an axis of East and West that furthers notions of a diasporic geography.

On his search Milkman follows a torturous trail through rural Virginia. The town he seeks is not marked on his “Texaco map”, forcing him to “pay close attention to signs and landmarks” (260). Here Morrison once more draws attention to ideas of cartography. Rather like Not Doctor Street, Shalimar does not appear on published maps. The “no-name hamlet, a place so small nothing financed by State funds or private enterprise reared a brick there”, can be found only by reading local topography (259). And Milkman, who has “never in his life seen a woman on the street without a purse”, is astounded to observe that in this remote Southern community “pocketbook ... change purse ... wallet ... [and] keys” are all unnecessary (259). Here doors are not locked and women walk around bare-legged, their hair unstraightened, looking “the way Pilate must have looked as a girl, looked even now, but out of place in the big Northern city she had come to” (263). The symbolic association of Pilate and her chosen way of life with the South is thus furthered. Indeed, Shalimar, off the edge of official maps, is presented as a settlement where she might fit right in.<sup>63</sup>

Milkman, a “city Negro”, however, alienates himself from locals and gets into a fight almost immediately (266). The protagonist fails to comprehend his offensiveness when he comments on the town’s women and flaunts his spending power to the young men of Shalimar.<sup>64</sup> They in turn resent the Northerner whose

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<sup>62</sup> Wilentz, p. 124.

<sup>63</sup> According to Heinze, Shalimar is “the community furthest removed geographically and ideologically from white society”. Heinze, p. 140. Deborah Barnes goes further, suggesting that Morrison “uses the South as a trope – the avatar of Africentric communal culture”. Deborah Barnes, ‘The Bottom of Heaven: Myth, Metaphor, and Memory in Toni Morrison’s Reconstructed South’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 17-36 (p. 25).

<sup>64</sup> Discussing Southern principles of civility and hospitality Lucille Fultz comments, “[w]hat is most striking about Milkman’s violation of the Black ethical code is that he, thanks to his father’s wealth, has the advantages of bourgeois material comforts; but because his father has abandoned those simple values that Southern Blacks view as fundamental to familial and social interaction, Milkman has missed his Southern rootedness”. Lucille Fultz, ‘Southern Ethos / Black Ethics in Toni Morrison’s Fiction’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 79-95 (p. 85).

manner and “clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land” (266). “They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in ... trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless labourers” (266). The presentation of their point of view within the narrative reveals Milkman’s estrangement, his arrogance, and his ignorance about African American deprivation. Indeed, developing sensitivity to the concerns of others, becoming less self-absorbed, will be key to his quest.

Later Milkman is approached by community elders (who “would test him, match and beat him, probably, on some other ground”) and invited to join a nighttime hunt (269). He accepts the challenge and hence embarks on an adventure that alludes to a Faulknerian vision of the natural world, the South and manhood. Yet, as Brenner observes, the hunt’s “subtext is satiric”.<sup>65</sup> The episode refers to ‘The Bear’, described by MacKethan as William Faulkner’s “elaborate, elegiac witness to white male bonding and coming of age”, through gestures such as having Milkman give up belongings that symbolise his privilege and distance from the life of the woods.<sup>66</sup> For example, he is told to remove the change from his pockets, an instruction which echoes Isaac McCaslin’s renunciation of the taint of his compass and watch so that he can trail Old Ben.<sup>67</sup> But the hunters in *Song of Solomon* track down coon (a prey scorned and left to subordinates in Faulkner’s story), joke about bears, and allow Milkman to integrate with them through laughter at his incompetence (rather than through Ike-like prowess). Morrison hence offers a parody of mythic masculine encounters with the Southern woods as well as her own version of the negotiation of this environment.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Brenner, p.118.

<sup>66</sup> MacKethan, pp.107-108.

<sup>67</sup> William Faulkner, *Go Down Moses* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp.146-7. Ike or Isaac is the hero of ‘The Bear’, a gifted huntsman “with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive”, attuned to the “wilderness” that Faulkner celebrates. Faulkner, p.135.

<sup>68</sup> She has hinted that the novel “[s]otto (but not completely) is [her] own giggle (in Afro-American terms) at the proto-myth of the journey to manhood”. Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things’, p.226.

Milkman struggles with the terrain and gruelling distance covered on the hunt, it being “the longest trek [he] had ever made in his life” (274). He soon begins to “limp and hobble”, unable to keep pace with the older men (275). The protagonist’s inability to navigate wilderness, established in Danville, is used once more to signal his alienation from the values and skills associated with the South.<sup>69</sup> As he rests against the bark of a tree, however, he experiences a profound revelation. Sat “[u]nder the moon, on the ground”, Milkman’s “cocoon” gives way so that “thoughts [come] unobstructed, by other people, things, even by the sight of himself” (277). Having “nothing ... to help him - not his money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes”, Milkman recognises that here “all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch” (277). He begins to observe his surroundings, realising that the hunters work by interpreting signs in the forest, by “signalling one another ... location or pace” (277). That the hounds’ cries act as a “sort of radar that indicate[s] to the men where they [are] and what they [see] and what they want ... to do about it” (278). Such communication helps the hunters to orientate themselves, without light or compass directions, through a close connection to the earth and its creatures. “All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells ... It was all language ... it was what there was before language” (278). Milkman so learns to listen, to use his senses, and this sudden understanding that the environment can be read “as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers”, gives him insight into what Guitar must have “missed about the South” (278). This epiphany initiates a new sensitivity in Milkman, not only to the world around him, but also the people.<sup>70</sup>

The protagonist’s revelation, in addition, prompts in him a feeling of ease and belonging in the woods: “Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum’s surface-roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather ...

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<sup>69</sup> According to G  nevi  re Fabre, “[t]he spatial distance that he has to cover gives a measure of his original estrangement and disconnectedness”. G  nevi  re Fabre, ‘Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*’, in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1988), pp.105-114 (p.113).

<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Valerie Smith writes, his “development rests partly on his comprehending the ways in which his life is bound up with the experiences of others and partly on his establishing an intimate connection with the land”. Smith, p.13.

He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say” (279). He thus attains affinity with the land and is comforted by its affectionate embrace. Although his reverie of connection with the natural world is interrupted by an attack by Guitar, Milkman, thanks to his newly attuned senses, resists and survives the violence. In seizing life he values even more the ability to read his environment. He can now pick out “the wild, wonderful sound of three baying dogs who he *knew* had treed a bobcat” and at last acquires an “accurate ... sense of direction” in catching up with the other hunters [my emphasis] (279-280). Milkman finds himself “exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there - on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp” (281). In this passage Milkman affirms his rootedness (explored through the analogy of stalks or trunks extending down), a closeness to the earth he has not felt before. He, like Pilate, is allied with tree imagery and celebrates a sense of home in the American landscape (perhaps achieving what Lincoln’s Heaven once recommended). The experience both rids him of his limp and links him to an ancestral figure imagined by Macon earlier in the text. This vision of an unknown forefather offers a touchstone, a model of positive black identity from before the dislocations and definitions of slavery: “some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real” (17). Although associated with this African by his empowering walking of the earth, Milkman significantly achieves rootedness in different soil, learning how to belong in the South. Morrison’s text thus alludes to the sense of ease of a native African, but uses it to describe what Milkman discovers on the American continent.

After the hunt Milkman is integrated into the Shalimar community. Once he is “the butt of their humour” the elders express conviviality “quite unlike the laughter the trip had begun with” and invite him to join them in the ritual of cutting up the bobcat that they have shot (281). Morrison’s narrative offers a graphic and precise account of the dismemberment, a process in which Milkman is awarded the honour of removing the animal’s heart (282). This description is interspersed with italicised quotations from an earlier conversation between

Guitar and Milkman. These refrains recall for the reader Guitar's political project whilst simultaneously representing Milkman's memories of his friend turned assailant (see 281-283). The butchery of prey summons up Guitar's Southern upbringing, but also perhaps, through the text's vivid detailing of bodily decapitation, the use to which he now puts his hunting skills. As Krumholz writes, "[t]he description of the skinning evokes all of the physical horrors of lynching, castration, and mutilation suffered by black men, while it also challenges Guitar's murderous solution to the situation of black men".<sup>71</sup>

Milkman's initiation in the woods proves a vital learning experience. On the hunt he encounters the features of the local landscape, "Solomon's Leap and Ryna's Gulch", that will later help him to trace his ancestors (302).<sup>72</sup> Following his self-revelation he also begins his first reciprocal relationship with another person, the bath that a Shalimar woman gives him signalling rebirth. This couple's mutual respect and generosity is reflected in Morrison's lyrical and balanced syntax (for example, "[s]he put salve on his face. He washed her hair ... He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat" (285)). As well as discovering such sharing and caring, Milkman changes the objective of his quest after the hunt. Indeed, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with decoding an oral legacy relating to his family, forgetting about the gold. This shift is marked by the image of a peacock soaring away, described after the dismemberment of the bobcat (283). Throughout the text peacocks appear whenever Macon's, Milkman's, or Guitar's desire for gold is evident.<sup>73</sup> The male birds decked in "jewelry" are hence associated with greed and "vanity" (179). What the protagonist learns, however, is that "you got to give up the shit that weighs you down", renouncing such values, if you "[w]anna fly" (179).

As his Southern encounter evolves, Milkman begins to "feel connected, as though there [is] some cord or pulse or information ... shared" (293). This is a social bond never experienced in the North where he "considered himself the

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<sup>71</sup> Krumholz, p.563.

<sup>72</sup> As Carolyn Jones points out, "[n]ot only are Milkman's people memorialized in song, they are constitutive of place: who they were and what they did shapes the land itself". Carolyn Jones, 'Southern Landscape as Psychic Landscape in Toni Morrison's Fiction', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 37-48 (p.43).

outsider”, not “belong[ing] to anyplace or anybody” (293). Yet what he now senses “in Shalimar remind[s] him of how he used to feel in Pilate’s house” (293). Milkman, in addition, overcomes his previous lack of purpose (a development further highlighted by Guitar’s increasingly misguided pathology, marking an inversion of the pair’s perceptive abilities). His mission becomes to trace his ancestors, “who they were and what they were like”, especially once he recognises the significance of the fact that “Macon didn’t ever try to get to Virginia” whilst “Pilate headed straight for it” (293). Not only does Milkman reject his father’s example in favour of his aunt’s emphasis on kinship, but he also accepts information that he would previously have discredited. He reasons that since it was “true that Pilate did not have a navel” then “anything could be”, choosing to believe in Macon Dead Senior’s guidance to his daughter from beyond the grave, for example (294). This marks a change in Milkman’s apprehension of the world. Certainly the re-awakening of his imagination is signified when he dreams (as he did as a child) of flight. This fantasy of “sailing high over the earth ... [and] the dark sea” gives the protagonist a sense of freedom and anticipates both ensuing discoveries about his ancestors, and his own eventual fate (298).

Due to his re-educative journey Milkman comes to see his family in a new light, feeling shame at his previous disregard and homesickness “for the very people he had been hell bent to leave” (300). He finally comprehends his mother’s emotional deprivation and recognises Macon as an “old man ... who acquired things and used people to acquire more things” in an attempt to pay “homage to his own father’s life and death” (300). Eventually Milkman also considers his selfish mistreatment of Hagar, realising how “[h]e had used her” (301). Rather than escaping the tiresome obligations of kinship, Milkman thus comes to reassess his relationships with those closest to him.

The final stage of the protagonist’s transformation arrives when he learns his family’s history from Shalimar folklore. Hearing local children play, he is surprised to recognise the “old blues song Pilate sang all the time, ‘O Sugarman

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, p.170 & pp.178-179.

don't leave me here'" (300). This music, "[l]ike the Negro spiritual encoding messages for escape or resistance", when unravelled reveals an important narrative.<sup>74</sup> Lacking writing tools, Milkman is forced to memorise the chant, resorting to a preliterate form of knowing to enable him to decipher a story about the flight of a slave who is said to have "gone home" (303).<sup>75</sup> The familiar names invoked allow him to trace a genealogical trail linking Solomon in Shalimar with Jake (or Macon Dead Senior) in Danville, with his "own people" in Michigan (304). Thus the oral culture of the South, sustained by Pilate in the North, provides the key to a past otherwise withheld from, or lost to dispersed African American descendents.

Despite the displacement of previous generations to Pennsylvania and Michigan, through his experiences in Shalimar Milkman is able to reconnect with familial history. Using a children's song he reconstructs a text silenced or distorted by official records.<sup>76</sup> According to Helen Lock, "many recent African-American written narratives have sought to propose an alternative approach to the past, by foregrounding the functioning of oral memory ... *thematically and structurally*".<sup>77</sup> Such a project can be identified in *Song of Solomon* as both the protagonist and the reader have to perform detective work, listening to many voices and their versions of the past to piece together a plot.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the song of Solomon itself highlights issues of vernacular language and preliterate and communal memory (see 303). Perhaps most importantly however, it allows Milkman to resist the disruption of his history and to recover a narrative of ancestral roots and routes.

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<sup>74</sup> Dixon, p.162.

<sup>75</sup> Here, according to Mobley, "Morrison celebrates Milkman's ability to engage in active listening, to move out of his narcissistic self long enough to be able to hear another's voice ... He discovers, in essence, that Pilate has been teaching him all his life who he was/is/could be". Mobley, pp.60-61.

<sup>76</sup> One of the reasons that the Deads' past has been lost is their name which resulted from an administrative error at the Freedmen's Bureau and obscured their link to Solomon. I will discuss this further later.

<sup>77</sup> [my emphasis] Helen Lock, "'Building up from Fragments": The Oral Memory Process in some Recent African-American Written Narratives', in *Race-ing Representations: Voice, History, and Sexuality*, ed. by Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), pp.200-212 (p.202).



The story that Milkman unearths is one of “[f]lying African[s]”, “some old folks’ lie” about a slave who “flew back to Africa”, defiantly refusing the confines and humiliations of bondage, but leaving behind “a slew of children ... Wife, everybody” (321-2). With this local legend Morrison refers to accounts of slaves escaping subjugation in America by miraculously returning to their homeland. She acknowledges that “the flying myth” may mean “Icarus to some readers”, yet asserts “my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts”.<sup>79</sup> A parallel literary allusion to this heritage can be found in Paule Marshall’s novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, which features a tale of Ibos who, on reaching American shores and foreseeing their oppression, simply turned around and walked back home to Africa across the ocean.<sup>80</sup> These narratives evoke trails of reconnection that defy the dislocation of the Middle Passage and, as Hirsch points out, celebrate abilities that challenge “the rationality which undergirds every Western belief system”.<sup>81</sup> As I will explore, they also suggest a symbolic geography of the black Atlantic.

Milkman is delighted to discover that the much-celebrated slave who flew “like a bird ... [w]ent right on back to wherever it was he came from” is his ancestor (323). Yet Solomon’s departure caused his wife, left with twenty children to care for alone, to lose her mind. His flight was a defiant rejection of enslavement, mythologised in Shalimar as heroic, but it was also an act of abandonment. Indeed, Solomon’s escape had grave consequences for his family,

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<sup>78</sup> Lock also identifies how “[r]eaders must enact the oral memory process by piecing together fragments, suggestions, hints, to make a whole”. Lock, p.204. Indeed, Morrison’s text is structured so that the reader’s own progress emulates Milkman’s journey to knowledge.

<sup>79</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, with Thomas LeClair, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), pp.119-128 (p.122).

<sup>80</sup> Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (London: Virago, 1983), pp.37-39. Such stories recur in writing by African Americans (see for example, Robert Hayden’s poem ‘O Daedalus, Fly Away Home’, Ralph Ellison’s tale ‘Flying Home’ or Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*) and relate to the African myth that black people could fly until they first ate the salt introduced to them by whites. Gurleen Grewal identifies the legend as “one specific to Gullah slaves of coastal Georgia and South Carolina”, whereas Wendy Walters describes its “wide geographic currency ... within Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean communities as well as in the U.S.”. Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), p.65 and Wendy Walters, “‘One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair, / Take My Wings and Cleave De Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness”, *MELUS*, 22, 3 (1997), 3-29 (p.4).

<sup>81</sup> Hirsch, p.84.

in particular for the son that he tried to take with him but dropped from the sky, so causing traumatic displacement and dislocation. Jake's subsequent adoption into a Native American home, as Matus observes, "allows Morrison ... to give a condensed account of hybridity and intermixing in African-American genealogy", but, in addition, further disrupts the Deads' history, later resulting in a lack of ancestral connection and knowledge of the past.<sup>82</sup> The implied conflict between Solomon's liberty and mobility, and his paternal responsibility is heralded by Morrison's epigraph which refers to both fathers that fly and the children left behind trying to bear witness.<sup>83</sup> As I will discuss, such tensions also figure in Milkman's own quest.

Jubilant at tracing his line of descent, the protagonist symbolically aligns himself with Solomon. He seeks "the whole entire complete deep blue sea" to swim in and, on settling for a local river, leaps skywards "like a bullet, iridescent, grinning, splashing water", so emulating his great grandfather who "didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fucking tee double you ay" but "could fly his own self" (327-8). Elated by his membership of the "flyin motherfuckin tribe", Milkman eulogises Solomon shouting "No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home", "sailed on off like a black eagle" (328). This celebration of return across the Atlantic affirms connection to African origins. It counters the displacements of slavery, indeed, recalls the Dead family's onyx-skinned African ancestor envisaged earlier. Complicating Stepto's North / South polarity, Morrison thus introduces the concept of an empowering trajectory between the continents of America and Africa, East and West. Paul Gilroy's theory of a black Atlantic world, and his use of the image of ships traversing the ocean to emblematised a "transcultural, international formation", offers a spatial

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<sup>82</sup> Matus, p.84. According to Matus, "[t]he trauma of the father's abandonment ... infects the descendants of Solomon - as it does the text - with a series of distortions in memory and obstacles to interpretation". Matus, p.73.

<sup>83</sup> Morrison comments, "[t]he fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of *Song*: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history". Toni Morrison, 'Talk with Toni Morrison', with Mel Watkins, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), pp.43-47 (p.46).

model that is suggestive here.<sup>84</sup> Solomon's departure subverts the one-way traffic of the Middle Passage and plots a course of interconnection that can be related to the routes of *The Black Atlantic*. Indeed, the dynamics of his flight open the narrative up to the wider diaspora engendered by slavery. His mythic paradigm, however, is not unqualified. Whilst his airborne crossing defies the hegemonic dislocations of the slave trade, it also creates a traumatic familial legacy. Pilate, a descendent who never "leav[es] the ground", I propose, offers an alternative model that does not give rise to further displacement, does not involve an abandonment of those to whom you are connected, for whom you are responsible (336). On her travels Pilate also heads East towards Africa yet she goes only as far as an island off the coast of Virginia. For, although associated with Africanness, Pilate's journey is motivated by a desire to seek out her people, to find her family within the U.S. Indeed, the relations that Pilate searches for are the descendents of Solomon, those deserted by him who have since shaped their own home and found rootedness without leaving the American continent.<sup>85</sup>

Milkman's euphoric affirmation of his flying ancestor is therefore interrupted, undercut in the narrative. The protagonist is asked "[w]ho'd he leave behind?", a troubling question that works as a reminder of Solomon's children and wife, Ryna, but also of Milkman's own devastating abandonment of Hagar (328).<sup>86</sup> To emphasise this point Pilate's teaching that "you just can't fly on off and leave a body" is then enacted in Morrison's textual form (147). During Part Two of the novel the third person narrative follows closely Milkman's experiences in the South. After his celebration of Solomon's flight, however, the focus unexpectedly shifts back to Michigan. In Chapter Thirteen the narrative returns to Hagar and describes her deterioration and death. It hence takes readers back

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<sup>84</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p.4.

<sup>85</sup> According to Barnes, "by regarding America (particularly the South) rather than Africa as the 'home' in this land for Black people ... they automatically become rightful heirs to America's legacy". Barnes, p.19.

<sup>86</sup> Hence, as Matus points out, "[e]ven as Morrison allows Milkman to experience elevation and pride in the legends of his flying ancestor, the text does not lose sight of the loss on the other side of celebration ... As Milkman discovers that he is the successor to his flying forefather, the reader begins to see the hapless Hagar as a latter-day incarnation of her ancestor, Ryna". Matus, p.78.

to the North and all that the protagonist left behind.<sup>87</sup> The positioning of this tragic episode caused by male desertion is all the more effective in view of Ryna's recently discovered story. It signals that Milkman must acknowledge that "[w]hile he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying", must accept his own responsibilities in order to achieve true agency and freedom (332).<sup>88</sup> He is revealed to do this, I suggest, when, having carried the recovered family story North, he goes South again with Pilate (grandmother to Hagar) who wishes to bury her father's bones at Solomon's Leap. Indeed, it is at the grave of Jake that the protagonist learns his final lesson. He sings to Pilate as she dies, symbolically adopting Ryna's part of the song of Solomon and altering the words to address his female ancestor: "Sugargirl don't leave me here" (336). And realises that "[w]ithout ever leaving the ground she could fly" (336). Milkman hence finally apprehends that Pilate achieved the liberty of Solomon whilst retaining connection to the earth and kin.

The novel closes when, in response to a second attack by Guitar, Milkman launches himself from Solomon's Leap, "[a]s fleet and bright as a lodestar ... now [knowing] what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (337). This ambiguous narrative conclusion does not make clear the outcome of his act. Yet the suggestion that he possesses new wisdom, becoming a "lodestar", a bright navigation point for others, is hopeful. In addition, Milkman jumps into a landscape that resonates with the exuberant cry "*Life life life life*" and his choice is associated with a positive belief in the flight of his ancestor

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<sup>87</sup> The chapter, in addition, offers a fresh perspective of Guitar who shows compassion for Hagar, trying to build up her sense of self-worth and empathising with her loss. To some extent this narrative glimpse is redemptive.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Awkward offers a useful reading of this aspect of the text. He proposes that Morrison significantly revises the traditional story of the flying African: "Morrison's appropriation of the myth, while it preserves a clear connection to mythology concerning black flight's possibilities, divests the narrative of its essential communal impulses". Solomon's solitary flight, his abandonment of Ryna and lack of social responsibility mean that "the novelist's woman-centered ideology complicates her use of (afrocentric) myth". The fate of Hagar, her circumscription must be placed alongside Milkman's liberation. "Chapter 13 of *Song of Solomon*, which records the circumstances surrounding Hagar's death, offers a literal – and strategic – breaking of the male monomythic sequence ... This interruption serves to problematize a strictly celebratory afrocentric analysis of Milkman's achievements". Michael Awkward, "Unruly and Let Loose". Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*, in *Modern Critical Interpretations Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), pp.95-113 (pp.97-109). Awkward's essay is convincing but he fails to take into account Pilate's role or the positive model of female identity that she offers.

(337).<sup>89</sup> Whilst the protagonist's leap affirms Solomon's defiance and confidence, as discussed above, he is imbued also now with the knowledge of his aunt. His quest is ended by a gesture that echoes the launch of Robert Smith with which the novel began. Yet Smith proposed (and failed) to fly North over Lake Superior and Milkman leaps, like his great grandfather, East towards the Atlantic.<sup>90</sup>

In Morrison's "giggle (in Afro-American terms) at the proto-myth of the journey to manhood" not only does Milkman's quest come to affirm communal integration and responsibility as opposed to individual freedom, but he is also guided on it by a female, not a male, mentor.<sup>91</sup> Whilst some critics have rebuked Morrison for reproducing the myth of the male hero and relegating the function of woman to that of helper who never fully shares in the protagonist's knowledge and epiphany, most view Pilate's as a positive role.<sup>92</sup> It is her teachings, the felicitous space her home provides, and her oral legacy, that allow Milkman to transform his journey into one of reconnection with, rather than divorce from, his ancestry.<sup>93</sup> In addition, as Benston observes, *Song of Solomon* undermines the "assumed equation of maleness with mobile self-discovery by subtly presenting the female quest as a parallel, if not prior, version of its male counterpart".<sup>94</sup> Indeed, I propose that Pilate's own travels constitute an alternative picaresque trail within the novel.

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<sup>89</sup> The author refers to Milkman's act of faith in terms of an exploration of "the whole business of how to handle one's self in a more dangerous element called air, learning how to trust, to risk, and knowing that much about one's self to be able to ... surrender ... to the air". Toni Morrison, 'Interview with Toni Morrison', with Cecil Brown, *The Massachusetts Review*, 36, 3 (1995), 455-473 (p.463).

<sup>90</sup> In an unpublished thesis entitled 'Cross-Currents: Black Identity in African American and Black British Fiction', Leila Kamali suggests that his concluding act can be read as a leap towards Africa as an empowering space of possibility.

<sup>91</sup> Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things', p.226. Catherine Carr Lee writes, "[t]hus, where the classic American initiation story takes the youthful initiate from the bosom of hearth and family, leaving him isolated and alone, Morrison begins with a twentieth-century modern man, alienated and fragmented, and ends with that man's successful connection with a people". Catherine Carr Lee, 'Initiation, South, and Home in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 109-123 (p.120).

<sup>92</sup> See Heinze, p.137.

<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Milkman's journey is repeatedly informed by black women: his sister offers home truths that speed his departure, the advice of Circe about his family and on how to listen proves vital, and it is a Shalimar woman, Susan Byrd, who fills in the gaps of Solomon's song. According to Benston, Morrison refashions "the Ulyssian experience of bewitchment - suggesting thereby that the black woman, far from blocking or distorting the male quest, serves as its enabling agent". Benston, p.110.

<sup>94</sup> Benston, p.110.

Narratives of journeys through the Americas have often defined such movement in terms of gender. Male explorers, conquistadors and artists have traditionally identified the New World 'wilderness' as female, projecting fantasies onto the topography they penetrate, tame and describe. Discourses of the American West in particular mythologise the figures of the pioneer and the cowboy and, according to Eleanor Porter, "celebrate ... virile [male] self-assertion", something "not surprising if we consider the gendering of the territory as the female object of the masculine gaze. Nature, the land as woman, is to be controlled and cultivated ... but still desired as the ever-wild ... frontier".<sup>95</sup> Discussing Canadian fiction, Porter calls for an alternative mapping to counter this gaze which enacts a fantasy of unimpeded movement across empty space, advance through a blank or virgin landscape gendered as female.<sup>96</sup> Morrison in *Song of Solomon*, I argue, indeed formulates a different cartography, exposing colonial relations to place and affirming a female model of mobility. Whilst Jean Baudrillard's analysis of modern travel in America suggests that the speed of driving on the open road fosters a gaze that scans distance and linearity, "rather than depth or engagement", Morrison emphasises close interaction between self and environment.<sup>97</sup> Her fiction presents a re-visionary mapping that defines encounters with the American landscape anew, that depicts not just the conceptualisation of space, but also time spent in it, hence encompassing the

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<sup>95</sup> Eleanor Porter, 'Heroic Trajectories', *Borderlines: Studies in American Culture*, 4 (1997), 153-165 (p.155). As Blunt and Rose point out, "[t]he feminisation of colonised landscapes can illustrate the positionality inherent in viewing/reading landscapes ... Imperialist literature often incorporated sexual imagery to create and sustain the heroic status of male colonisers". Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, 'Introduction: Women's Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies', in *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, ed. by Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), pp.1-22 (p.10). Kate Soper writes "it is in the perception of the colonizer, for whom nature is both a nurturant force – a replenished bosom or womb of renewal – and a 'virgin' terrain ripe for penetration, that the metaphor of the land as female is most insistent". Kate Soper, 'Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature', in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.139-143 (p.142).

<sup>96</sup> Porter, p.153.

<sup>97</sup> Porter, p.156. In his discussion 'Vanishing Point' Baudrillard claims, "[s]peed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself ... speed is ... the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire ... Triumph of forgetting over memory, an uncultivated, amnesiac intoxication". Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), pp.6-7.

“buried perspectives” sought by Porter.<sup>98</sup> *Song of Solomon* details Milkman’s immediate experience of terrain, his struggles to orientate himself both whilst looking for the cave and on the nighttime hunt, and his increasingly sensitive communion with nature and his surroundings in the South. The author herself explains, “Milkman has to experience the elements ... He twice enters water. And he flies in the air. When he walks the earth, he feels a part of it, and that is his coming of age, the beginning of his ability to connect with the past and perceive the world as alive”.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps most significantly of all, I suggest, the protagonist encounters an inscribed landscape, a topography not blank, but rather deeply layered and encoded with its history.

In *The Green Breast of the New World* Louise Westling interrogates the “imperialist nostalgia that has always been at the heart of American pastoral – a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape and its creatures that masked the conquest and destruction of the ‘wild’ continent”.<sup>100</sup> She proposes that “as we examine the highly charged landscapes of twentieth century fiction writers” we must ask “whether they succeed in breaking out of the destructive gender oppositions and imperialist nostalgia endemic to American pastoral traditions”.<sup>101</sup> I contend that in *Song of Solomon* Morrison performs just such a revision, rejecting a narrative in which the “solitary hero is ... shaped by two conflicting feminine forces - the trammelling society that seeks to suffocate him and the promising wilderness landscape where he can find freedom and peace”.<sup>102</sup> Not only does Milkman’s journey, meandering in direction and text, belie pioneering penetration of blank territory, but his quest also affirms integration with, rather than escape from community and family. Whilst he may have set out to flee Not Doctor Street, what he learns is the value of connection. Morrison’s text, in addition, makes satirical reference to Faulknerian tropes of manhood, nature and the South. Although *Song of Solomon* itself idealises the woods of Pennsylvania and Virginia, nowhere in the novel is the earth gendered

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<sup>98</sup> Porter, p.159.

<sup>99</sup> Morrison, ‘The Language Must Not Sweat’, p.126.

<sup>100</sup> Louise H. Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender and American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p.2. She locates authors such as Emerson and Thoreau within this tradition.

<sup>101</sup> Westling, p.53.

<sup>102</sup> Westling, p.84.

as female. In fact, whilst in his closest contact with the land, sitting among the roots of a tree, Milkman is described as being cradled and nurtured by “the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather” [my emphasis] (279). Morrison thus divests the American pastoral of its gender associations as well as subverting its imperialist nostalgia with a tale of African American dislocation and search for a place of belonging.

Finally, Pilate’s peregrinations, which are far greater in duration and geographic scope than Milkman’s, offer their own alternative picaresque. Pilate’s nomadic wanderings defy conventional ideas of the negotiation of landscape as she crosses over the boundaries of her school atlas on a quest to track down her people, to read the inscribed spaces of America. Indeed, she exhibits what Porter would term a deep engagement with environment and an empowering affinity with the natural world. Unlike her propertied brother, Pilate has a non-exploitative relation to place, collecting only rocks as tokens of remembrance from the sites that she visits.<sup>103</sup> Even her sense of direction, taking her to the South East coast, affirms ancestral links and recalls the trajectories of not just migration within the U.S., but also the displacements of the wider black diaspora. Her free-floating form of rootedness, in addition, offers a revisionary mode of being at home in America. I hence suggest, with Westling, that whilst “[t]he ‘melodramas of beset manhood’ which predominate in official versions of American literary culture require a feminized landscape where solitary heroes can escape the demeaning responsibilities of communal life” alternative discourses “substitute new stories that suggest other ways of living in the land”.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, *Song of Solomon* evokes a symbolic geography that renegotiates the spaces of the so-called New World in a compelling way.

In conclusion, Morrison’s novel, I argue, presents a fictional cartography that explores patterns of dislocation and reconnection. The politics of place, that is the agencies achieved through different engagements with the earth are integral

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<sup>103</sup> According to Heinze, “[i]n her value system land is not the arena for political or economic empowerment, or an entity that can be owned. For Pilate land simply is; it does not belong to anyone. While there may be temporary custodians of the land, the land itself is eternal and thus independent of the generations of people that will lay claim to it”. Heinze, p.134.

<sup>104</sup> Westling, pp.169-170.



to this project. Not only does the text chart a black man's educative journey from the North to the South and his movement towards understanding of a disrupted history, but it also offers a female quest which reconfigures male travel narratives, a symbolic passage over the Atlantic that defies the displacements of slavery, and an oral legacy that enables a process better termed recuperation than immersion. *Song of Solomon* thus describes a diasporic geography of roots and routes that is grounded in black history.

The revisionary 'mapping' that I have been trying to delineate is perhaps best summed up by a passage that appears towards the end of Milkman's Bildungsroman:

Ohio, Indiana, Michigan were dressed up like the Indian warriors from whom their names came. Blood red and yellow, ocher and ice blue. He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead', recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is ... remembered, it will die when you do. Like the street he lived on, recorded as Mains Avenue, but called Not Doctor Street by the Negroes in memory of his grandfather who was the first colored man of consequence in that city ... Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in - because she *had* lived there. And having lived there, it was hers - and his, and his father's, his grandfather's, his grandmother's. Not Doctor Street, Solomon's Leap, Ryna's Gulch, Shalimar, Virginia.

He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky river, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Do, Cool

Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, Cat-iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-Up, and *Dat Nigger* (329-330).

Here the layered names of places and people form a litany of ‘buried perspectives’. Milkman has now learnt to ask what lies “beneath the names”, to try to read the hidden “real names ... that [have] meaning”. His mention of the “recorded name” of Macon Dead Senior, for example, exposes the dispossession undergone by African Americans. For when Jake, son of Solomon, registered at the Freedmen’s Bureau he was renamed through the carelessness of a drunken white official. Whilst his real name was erased due to an administrative accident, elsewhere in the text reference is made to the oppressive imposition of slave names (see 160).<sup>105</sup> Milkman’s list of names, “got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses”, bears witness to the process by which African Americans have earned their names, “the best way they can”, since dislocation from African naming (88). Such nicknames work to counter what Morrison has termed “the absence of a name given at all ... the feeling of anonymity, the feeling of orphanage”.<sup>106</sup> Even Macon perceives the possibilities of affirmative naming, nostalgically envisaging an “ancestor ... who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name” (17-18). Although Morrison’s novel depicts the loss and burial of names, some positive assertions are made. Pilate knows and bears “[h]er own name” throughout and Milkman is able to learn the names of his ancestors (89). Indeed, the names recounted in the song of Solomon reveal much about his family past and the cultural diversity of the history of African America.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> On this issue Morrison comments “[i]f you come from Africa, your name is gone ... it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar”. Morrison, ‘The Language Must Not Sweat’, p.126.

<sup>106</sup> Morrison, ‘Intimate Things in Place’, p.25.

<sup>107</sup> “Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut / Yaruba Medina Muhammet too. / Nestor Kalina Saraka cake. / Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!” (303).

The protagonist not only considers the naming of people, but also questions what is “buried in and beneath the names of the places in [his] country”. Here Morrison furthers her exploration of the stratified history of the American landscape. According to Wilentz, “she shows the necessity of stripping off the layers of hegemonic discourse that have hidden ... the names ... underneath”.<sup>108</sup> To return to the terms of Huggan, she works to expose conventional mapping as “a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations”.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, in her geography the earth is encoded with past dispossessions, yet can be a means to finding belonging. The uncovering of buried perspectives is perhaps best illustrated by Milkman’s contemplation of the “dead lives and fading memories” that lie behind place names such as Ohio, Indiana and Michigan, Not Doctor Street, Solomon’s Leap and Ryna’s Gulch. His reflections recall Guitar’s poignant observation that “[t]he earth is soggy with black people’s blood. And before us Indian blood” (158). Here then a deeply layered and historicised cartography that retraces the displacements of both Native and African Americans and radically transforms imperialist narratives of the American landscape can be identified.<sup>110</sup> *Song of Solomon*, I propose offers a fictional mapping that re-envision the New World through a symbolic geography of dislocation and reconnection, voyages and rootedness.

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<sup>108</sup> Wilentz, p.128.

<sup>109</sup> Huggan, p.128.

<sup>110</sup> Carolyn Denard writes that “[t]he novel becomes for Morrison a necessary conduit, a way to connect, to see again the land and the people that were displaced”. Carolyn Denard, ‘The Mythical Consciousness of Morrison and Faulkner’, in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross and Judith Bryant Wittenburg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.17-30 (p.27).

## Chapter Two - *Beloved*

This chapter considers the depiction of the effects and mechanisms of slavery in Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*. It is divided into three parts. Firstly I examine Morrison's exploration of issues of race, sex and gender through the stories of Sethe and Paul D. Her novel, I propose, critically engages with racial oppression in a way that also encompasses an interrogation of the influence of patriarchy. Beginning with an analysis of Sethe's relation to domestic space and motherhood both within and without slavery, I go on to discuss Paul D's and Stamp Paid's experiences of emasculation, suggesting that Morrison's text offers a revisionary model of black manhood. This reading relates to dislocation in terms of the displacement and exclusion of both black men and women from conventional gender roles and definitions by racial slavery.

My chapter next addresses the evocation and significance of the Middle Passage in *Beloved*, identifying a persistent subtext of allusion to the traumatic transportation of Africans to the Americas. Through the character of Beloved and various spatial echoes, the novel recalls dislocatory sea voyages. But it also, I argue, poses trajectories of reconnection, encompassing African survivals, recoveries and memories that describe an arc back across the Atlantic. This exploration includes assessment of how Morrison's narrative form enacts and conveys rupture and displacement. Chapter Two concludes with an examination of how *Beloved*'s complex construction relates to its depiction of the bodily damage inflicted by slavery. I propose that the tropes of dismemberment and remembering operate formally as well as thematically as Morrison figures the unshareable nature of pain, how it destroys or unmakes language. This discussion incorporates consideration of the body as text or sign and of the operation of memory within the narrative. The novel, I contend, plays out both the dislocatory effects of slavery's violence and a process of reassembly, the re-emergence of discourse.

This chapter draws on critical engagements with the issues of race and sex, including that of Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic paradigm of traversal and exchange, and Elaine Scarry's theory of the body in pain.

## I. “Not a normal woman in a normal house”: True Black Womanhood and True Black Manhood?

The narrative of *Beloved*, set in 1873 yet comprising of, to a large extent, characters’ pre-emancipation memories, offers to date Toni Morrison’s most explicit and sustained interrogation of the institution of slavery and the experiences that it induced for African Americans. Indeed, it performs what the author herself terms “literary archaeology”, a form of imaginative recovery, seeking to explore the interior or personal lives of slaves in a way that previous accounts of slavery either couldn’t or didn’t.<sup>1</sup> In particular, through the stories of its central characters, the novel foregrounds issues of racist oppression and patriarchy. I propose to examine Morrison’s depiction of Sethe’s struggles as a black woman and mother and Paul D’s as a black man, arguing that it reveals how slaves of both sexes were displaced from the conventional gender roles and definitions of American society. The text’s third person narrative, through the use of multiple focalizers, explores the different forms of persecution undergone, and freedom achieved, by African American men and women respectively. Although Sethe’s and Paul D’s perspectives present at times conflicting apprehensions of slavery, I argue that ultimately the novel celebrates relationships of mutuality and equality between the sexes. Key to this is a sharing of experiences and the formulation of non-patriarchal affirmations of black manhood.

*Beloved*’s questioning of a system of patriarchy, as well as of racist oppression, accords with the project of much black feminist criticism. Particularly useful for

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<sup>1</sup> With reference to African American slave narratives Morrison explains, “[o]ver and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate’. In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things ... But most importantly at least for me – there was no mention of their interior life ... Only the act of the imagination can help me ... It’s a kind of literary archaeology: On the basis of some information and a little bit of guess work you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply”. Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’, in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. by William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp.85-102 (pp.90-2). See Toni Morrison, ‘A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison’, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp.188-217 (pp.206-208) for discussion of how and why the author draws upon the real story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner in *Beloved*.

my argument here, however, is Hazel Carby's consideration of discourses of sex, gender and slavery in early black women's writing. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, for example, Carby reads the narrative of Harriet Jacobs against the dominant mode of the male authored slave narrative, exploring the presentation of female experiences of racial slavery as distinct from those of men. This analysis examines how "black women had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition 'woman'".<sup>2</sup> Carby also investigates how male narratives depicted black women as "defined in terms of a physical exploitation resulting from the lack of the assets of white womanhood: no masculine protector or home and family". This representation is "linked to a threat to, or denial of, the manhood of the male slave. Black manhood, in other words, could not be achieved or maintained because of the inability of the slave to protect the black woman in the same manner that convention dictated the inviolability of the body of the white woman".<sup>3</sup> This discussion of slavery and patriarchy is suggestive for my reading of Morrison's project in *Beloved*. The novel, I propose, is preoccupied with such issues, making reference to previous accounts of slavery and presenting side by side Sethe's and Paul D's intersecting and differing points of view in a complex narrative exploration.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.6. In particular, the cult of true womanhood is identified as "a dominating image, describing the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women". Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.35.

<sup>4</sup> The ongoing nature of the problem of patriarchy in African American letters is illustrated by Madhu Dubey's analysis of how black women's writing of the 1970s responded to black nationalist ideology and the Black Aesthetic, rejecting the totalising moves of discourses that foregrounded racial difference and obscured other differences that confounded a unitary definition of black identity. She explores "the centering of the black man as the true subject of black nationalist discourse, and the concomitant marginalisation of the black woman". Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.16-18. More recently in *Race Men* Carby has taken up the male-centered assumptions at work in conceptions and representations of the black intellectual: "while contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society that 'conceives African American society in terms of a perennial 'crisis' of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority'". Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.5-6. Carby quotes Harper. See Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.x. bell hooks also considers the overlapping discourses of race and sex within North American culture and history, exploring how, using gendered metaphors, black oppression has been and still is figured as emasculation, and black resistance as the assertion of manhood.

Firstly examining Sethe's isolated and circumscribed position as a female slave at Sweet Home and her later residency on Bluestone Road, I suggest that the particular forms of oppression endured by the black woman shape the way in which she inhabits her own space on achieving freedom. Whilst *Beloved* depicts Paul D leading a transient life, it locates female characters within the household, reluctant to leave its shelter. I argue that this portrayal of domestic refuge forms a part of Morrison's investigation of gender ideology and slavery.

From the novel's opening, the author foregrounds the site of a house, number 124, and its occupation by black women. Sethe and her daughter Denver, it appears, have remained in this single home, despite a vengeful ghost, for eighteen years. Elsewhere Morrison discusses a specifically female sense of "being in a room ... or a house" and this commentary can perhaps be linked to her exploration in *Beloved*. She delineates a mode of inhabitation, of doing "intimate things in place", particular to women, or rather to those women operating within a division of labour that conventionally assigns to them the realm of the household.<sup>5</sup> It is this awareness of being rooted in a small, definite space and performing domestic work within it, looking out from it, that resonates through narrative description of life at 124. By lyrically detailing Sethe and Denver's household tasks, *Beloved* conveys an intimate sense of their private world.<sup>6</sup>

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hooks argues that African Americans must let go of "the idea that the trauma of racist domination is really the loss of black manhood" and reject "the sexualization of black liberation in ways that support and perpetuate sexism, phallocentrism, and male domination". bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: Southend Press, 1990), pp.60-63.

<sup>5</sup> "Sometimes my relationship to things in a house would be a little different from, say my brother's or my father's or my sons'. I clean them and I move them and I do very intimate things 'in place': [as a woman] I am sort of rooted in it, ... being in a room looking out, or being in a world looking out, or living in a small definite place". Toni Morrison, 'Intimate Things in Place: a Conversation with Toni Morrison', with Robert Stepto, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp.10-29 (pp.10-11).

<sup>6</sup> The narrative refers to "the interior sounds a woman makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work: a *sth* when she misses the needle's eye; a soft moan when she sees another chip in her one good platter; the low friendly argument with which she greets the hens. Nothing fierce or startling. Just that eternal, private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks" (172). Domestic imagery in Morrison's fiction is usually celebratory. Charles Scruggs notes the author's concentration on the household and, according to Cooperman, with *Beloved* she brings "huge historical truths to life in the very particular, intimate context of female-driven domesticity". Charles Scruggs, 'The Invisible City in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*',

Analysis of Morrison's evocation of domestic life can be facilitated by reference to bell hooks' discussion of the houses of black women:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension ... Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.<sup>7</sup>

hooks describes a space of affirmation and resistance, care and sustenance, created in the face of degradation and oppression outside the home. In *Beloved* the house on Bluestone Road provides Sethe's family with an enclave of relative security, a private realm within which selfhood can be asserted. As I will explore, 124 is presented as a "homeplace" conceived in opposition to the limiting definitions imposed on black women and mothers by slavery.

Whereas since emancipation Paul D has wandered all over the States, Sethe has remained stationary. In fact the black woman has stayed in the very same refuge that she first came to on escaping Sweet Home. When Paul D asks why she and Denver do not leave 124 Sethe is adamant: "No moving ... No more running" (15).

This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing – a shirtwaist or a sewing basket you could walk off from or give away any old time. She who had never had one but this one; she who left a dirt floor to come to this one; she who had to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner's kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers ... the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her (22).

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*Arizona Quarterly*, 48, 3 (1992), 95-132 (p.96) and Jeanette Batz Cooperman, *The Broom Closet: Secret Meanings of Domesticity in Postfeminist Novels by Louise Erdrich, Mary Gordon, Toni Morrison, Marge Piercy, Jane Smiley and Amy Tan* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p.79.

<sup>7</sup> hooks, p.42. hooks proposes that "[s]ince sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment" it has been black women who have "construct[ed] domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexual domination". hooks, p.42.



This passage suggests how the house on Bluestone Road assumes importance as the only one that Sethe has ever had and as the location of her attainment of freedom – a site not to be renounced lightly.<sup>8</sup> As a slave she had inhabited a rough cabin and worked in a kitchen that was not her own, attempting in vain to create some sense of belonging in this white domestic space. So, after fleeing slavery, Sethe cherishes 124 as her first real home and as a realm which enables her to fulfil the role formerly denied to her.<sup>9</sup> There Sethe was reunited with her children and introduced to communal life. It was also the shelter within which she found a space uncircumscribed by the proprietary relations of slavery: “Bit by bit, at 124 ... she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). The female homeplace that Morrison depicts is thus connected to Sethe’s specific experience of oppression. As I will explore, it is connected to her displacement from the functions of so-called true womanhood by slavery. Whilst Paul D defines his enslavement largely in terms of manhood and emasculation, Sethe interprets hers differently, emphasising the restriction of her ability to protect and nurture her children and her exclusion from domesticity.<sup>10</sup>

At Sweet Home Sethe was distinguished from her fellow blacks by sex, and from the only other woman, Mrs. Garner, by race and also therefore her status as property. She was isolated from community and so tried to create a space of belonging for herself at the site of her work:

A few yellow flowers on the table, some myrtle tied around the handle of the flatiron holding the door open for a breeze calmed her, and when Mrs. Garner

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<sup>8</sup> Morrison has explained the novel’s opening phrase “124” with reference to these issues: “Numbers here constitute an address, a thrilling enough prospect for slaves who had owned nothing, least of all an address”. Toni Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature’, in *Modern Critical Views Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), pp.201-230 (p.228).

<sup>9</sup> As Charles Scruggs observes, female slaves “were deprived of houses, of being householders. Hence Morrison’s female characters often evince strong attachments to houses, even those that seem cursed, and instead of rejecting the house as an image of confinement or entrapment, as white women writers have often done, in her fiction Morrison shows a desire to redeem the house”. Scruggs, ‘The Invisible City’, p.99.

<sup>10</sup> The particularity of female experiences of slavery was also emphasised by much earlier black women writers such as Harriet Jacobs: “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own”. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed.

and she sat down to sort bristle, or make ink, she felt fine ... Not scared of the men beyond. The five who slept in quarters near her, but never came in the night. Just touched their raggedy hats when they saw her and stared. And if she brought food to them in the fields ... never took it from her hands (23).

In attempting to make Mrs. Garner's kitchen a place where she could feel at home Sethe tried to ally herself with her mistress along the lines of their shared sex. By taking wildflowers into the house she hoped to make this domestic space a haven where she would be at ease working alongside another woman.<sup>11</sup> She felt the need for this refuge, to some extent, because of the male slaves of the farm. They formed their own fraternal community of which she was not a part, "[h]ow different they were without her, how they laughed and played and urinated and sang", kept their distance from her, yet also at times scared the teenage girl (23).

Despite her efforts to "love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it", to claim a piece of Mrs. Garner's domestic realm, Sethe later realises that she was deluded to act "as though Sweet Home was really one", "[a]s though a handful of myrtle ... in a whitewoman's kitchen could make it hers. As though mint sprig in the mouth changed the breath as well as its odor" (22-4). For neither the liberal "cradle" of Sweet Home, nor Mrs. Garner's garlanded kitchen, truly offered Sethe a place of belonging, affirmation or security (219). Indeed, the picturesque farm simply disguised the dislocation from humanity (and femininity) implicit in slavery. Morrison's exploration of such concerns in *Beloved* thus recalls Harriet Jacobs' much earlier account of servitude, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which also emphasised the significance of domestic space to nineteenth century definitions of womanhood.<sup>12</sup>

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by Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p.64.

<sup>11</sup> "[T]he two of them cooked, preserved, washed, ironed, made candles, clothes, soap and cider, fed chickens, pigs, dogs and geese; milked cows, churned butter, rendered fat, laid fires" (139-40).

<sup>12</sup> Even after Jacobs gained her liberty she remained dependent on a white mistress, occupying another woman's house: "The dream of my life is not yet realised. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble". Jacobs, p.156. Sethe's deprivation parallels that of Jacobs yet Morrison's protagonist does achieve domestic autonomy on reaching freedom. Hortense Spillers offers an alternative reading of slavery, gender and domesticity. She discusses the "ungendering" that took place in slavery (and during the Middle Passage), part of her argument being that "'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic" yet "[t]he human cargo of a slave vessel – in the fundamental effacement and remission of African family and proper names – offers a *counter*-narrative to notions of the

The contrast between Mrs. Garner's wedding and Sethe's own joining with Halle as well illustrates the subjugation of slavery. Having learnt about the communal celebration of her white mistress' marriage, Sethe expected something similar to formalise her own union with the youngest of the Sweet Home men. Seeing "Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and [hearing] her go on about what it was like" led her to believe that getting married ought to be marked by ritual:

They said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it ... no ceremony, no preacher. Nothing. I thought there should be something ... to say it was right and true. I didn't want it to be just me moving over a bit of pallet full of corn husks. Or just me bringing my night bucket into his cabin ... Two pounds of currants in the cake, she said, and four whole sheep. The people were still eating the next day. That's what I wanted. A meal maybe, where me and Halle and all the Sweet Home men sat down and ate something special (58-9).

This occasion hence brought into relief the differences between Mrs. Garner and her black work companion. Slave marriage was not legally recognised and rarely received authorisation of any form. As *Beloved* explores, it hence starkly contrasted with the pomp accorded to the most important day in the life of a respectable white woman. Confronted by this disparity, Sethe recognised how slavery dehumanised African Americans and, in particular, excluded her from the definitions of true womanhood. She so formulated her own celebration. Piecing together borrowed scraps of fabric, she sewed herself a wedding dress that at least was not "the sacking [she] worked in" (59). Through this makeshift gown Sethe thus created her own ritual of union with Halle, circumventing the constraints of slavery. The character's disappointed expectations illustrate how female slaves were denied the trappings of femininity, Morrison's text once more recalling Jacobs' narrative which questioned the double standard of the elevation of white womanhood and motherhood and the degradation of black women, sexually abused and used for breeding purposes.<sup>13</sup>

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domestic". Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17, 2 (1987), 65-81 (p.72).

<sup>13</sup> See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.47.

Despite their shared sex, Sethe and her mistress could not have a relationship unriven by the racialised distinctions of slavery. And yet Sethe was also unable to join with the male slaves in their close fraternal group and proud belief in their manhood. Once she became “Halle’s woman. Pregnant every year” she was, in addition, isolated by the fact of her motherhood (9). The presentation of her point of view in the narrative conveys both the loneliness she suffered as a black woman at Sweet Home and the anguish she endured as the mother of offspring who shared her status as property. Lacking a community containing female elders to offer advice, Sethe struggled to cope with her family and the unshareable nature of her situation. She breastfed her babies for too long because she had no one “who’d know when it was time to chew up a little something and give it to em” (160).<sup>14</sup> The effect that this alienation had on her experience of maternity became central to both Sethe’s conception of her oppression under slavery and her interpretation of later sites of freedom.

As a mother Sethe was dependent on her own resourcefulness and distant memory:

I tried to recollect what I’d seen back where I was before Sweet Home. How the women did there. Oh they knew all about it. How to make that thing you use to hang the babies in the trees – so you could see them out of harm’s way while you worked in the fields. Was a leaf thing too they gave em to chew on. Mint, I believe (160).

She spent her own childhood on a much larger plantation than Sweet Home where the female slaves did field labour, but were also able to rely on a whole black community for guidance and knowledge. Sethe was privileged in that she did only housework and could nurse her babies herself, yet suffered with “no woman to help [her] get through” (160). Eventually she had to tether her children to keep them safe and this restraint made her uncomfortable for it echoed the way in which whites treated slaves as animals (see 160). Thus, although Sweet Home seemed to offer a benevolent form of enslavement, she

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<sup>14</sup> “If you ain’t got nothing but milk to give em, well they don’t do things so quick. Milk was all I ever had. I thought teeth meant they was ready to chew. Wasn’t nobody to ask. Mrs. Garner never had no children and we was the only women there” (159). The only woman Sethe had contact with other than Mrs. Garner was Aunt Phyllis, the slave who attended each of her childbirths: “That’d be the only time I saw her. Many’s the time I wanted to get over to where she was. Just to talk” (159).

realised the farm's true nature, the devastating fact that her children served merely to increase the master's livestock.<sup>15</sup> *Beloved* hence offers a powerful portrait of the effect of slavery on Sethe. At Sweet Home she was isolated from companionship and community. She was excluded from the definitions of true womanhood and her role as a mother was also distorted and restricted. I propose that this experience of slavery is contrasted with that of Paul D within Morrison's narrative. It also shapes her later relationship to the house on Bluestone Road.

Whilst, as I will explore, Paul D conceived of slavery as emasculation, for Sethe it meant the degradation of her relationship to her children and the alignment of herself, as a black woman, with the animalistic. Indeed, she was perceived to be "the breeding one" (227). Valued only for her reproductive capacity and denied the autonomy of the male slaves, it was Sethe who first apprehended the implications of schoolteacher's pseudo-scientific observations. Following Mr. Garner's death, this learned relative arrived "with ... spectacles and a coach box full of paper", assumed control of the farm and started to write a book about the slaves (195).<sup>16</sup> At first they found schoolteacher's research comical: "I didn't care nothing about the measuring string. We all laughed about that ... schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool" (191). Yet Sethe recognised the way in which she was being denied the rational and sentient faculties of her white master when she overheard him giving a lesson to his nephews that involved listing her very own "animal" and "human characteristics"

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<sup>15</sup> As Carby points out, the black woman's "reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers". Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, pp.24-5.

<sup>16</sup> This scholarship makes him a figure comparable to the character of Nehemiah Adams in Sherley Anne Williams' novel *Dessa Rose* (London: Virago, 1998). Nehemiah is the author of *The Master's Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*. According to Henderson, "schoolteacher possesses the master's text, and as a data collector, cataloger, classifier, and taxonomist concerned with matters of materiality and empiricism, he divides or dismembers the indivisibility of the slaves' humanity to reconstruct (or perhaps deconstruct) the slave in his text". Mae G. Henderson, 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text', in *Toni Morrison's Beloved A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.79-106 (p.88). Morrison explains, "I use the name of schoolteacher because racism was pursued in a scholarly fashion. It was taught in theology, in anthropology, in biology, in the Darwinian theory of evolution". Toni Morrison, 'Toni Morrison Interview', with Angels Carabi, *Belles Lettres*, 9, 3 (1994), 38-9 & 86-90 (p.89).

on opposite sides of the page (195).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, she realised that he was “teaching [the slaves] things [they] couldn’t learn”, definitions that dehumanised them in order to justify their continued oppression with theses of racial inferiority (191).

When schoolteacher referred to Sethe’s unborn child as a “foal” his perception of her family in terms of economic potential was made clear (227). The female slave’s sole concern hence became sheltering her offspring from what she herself had experienced: “No notebook for [her] babies and no measuring string neither” (198). This characterisation echoes that of Jacobs’ narrative in which Linda Brent exhibits great courage and resilience whilst struggling for the freedom of her children.<sup>18</sup> *Beloved* hence draws on and develops themes explored by earlier female authored accounts of slavery.<sup>19</sup>

Key to Morrison’s depiction of Sethe’s suffering as a black woman and mother is the trauma she underwent during the slaves’ attempt to escape Sweet Home.

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<sup>17</sup> After this traumatic incident, of which she “never told Halle or nobody”, Sethe’s “head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in [her] scalp”, a sensation that ominously foreshadows the hummingbird’s “needle beaks” felt later when schoolteacher tries to reclaim her family from 124 (193 & 163).

<sup>18</sup> As Carby has identified, in *Incidents* “[c]onventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity were replaced by an active resistance ... [Brent’s] strength and resourcefulness to resist were not adopted from a reservoir of masculine attributes but were shown to have their source in her ‘woman’s pride, and a mother’s love for [her] children’”. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p.56. Motherhood is central to Jacobs’ account of her experience of slavery as a woman: “to the slave mother New Year’s day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalised her from childhood; but she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies”. Jacobs, p.17. Morrison has been criticised for failing “to articulate female subjectivity outside the limits of maternity”. See Sally Keenan, ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-appropriating the Past’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 4, 2 (1993), 154-164 (pp.157-6). Yet Keenan asserts, “[t]he story of slavery for women is inevitably a story of motherhood, and of the meanings women could give to their maternal function given its appropriation by the institution of slavery”. Keenan, ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-appropriating the Past’, pp.157-6.

<sup>19</sup> In an essay linking Jacobs’ and Morrison’s representations of motherhood Keenan notes “the writing of *Beloved* at the end of the twentieth century marks a return across that span of a hundred years to the beginnings of African American women’s engagements with their own histories”. Sally Keenan, “‘Four Hundred Years of Silence’: Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, in *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism*, ed. by Jonathan White (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp.45-81 (p.56). See also Jean Wyatt, ‘Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, in *Understanding Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms of the works by the Nobel Prize-Winning Author*, ed. by Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 2000), pp.231-257.

Forced to send her children on ahead, Sethe regretted this separation yet also envisaged a powerful maternal connection that demanded reunion:

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl ... Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it ... and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon (16).

The mother thus defined the imperative of reaching her family in terms of the milk that she carried for the youngest. It was this bond, however, that was violated by schoolteacher's nephews' assault on her. For Sethe was held down and suckled by the two adolescents whilst the master himself took notes: "Handled ... like [she] was the cow, no the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (200). Stripped of dignity and humanity, Sethe was rendered abject by the desecration of her nurturing function. Whilst the violence and humiliation used to enact white male power over the black female body was devastating, ultimately, however, Sethe triumphed over this debasement. For the theft of her maternal milk made her all the more determined to return it to whom it belonged. Indeed, to do so she endured enormous suffering, aptly defining her attainment of freedom as a restoration of her nursing role: "she enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together" (94).<sup>20</sup> Sethe's fierce motherly love thus enabled her to complete a gruelling escape and, as I will demonstrate, forge a new sense of self.<sup>21</sup>

In the house on Bluestone Road Sethe finally found a space that offered safety and permitted love:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own ... We was here. Each and everyone of my babies and me

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<sup>20</sup> Sethe's distinctive perception of her bond with her babies, and the horrors of her bodily violation, are linked within the narrative to the maternal relations that she herself experienced as a child. For, raised on a large plantation, she was fed by a wetnurse rather than her mother: "The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it" (200). These memories of deprivation influence her own determination to restore her milk to her children and increase the devastating significance of its theft.

<sup>21</sup> According to Jean Wyatt, "[i]n presenting Sethe's journey from slavery in Kentucky to the free state of Ohio as a maternal quest, Morrison is elaborating the figure of the heroic slave mother that in many female slave narratives replaces the figure of the heroic male fugitive". Wyatt, p.233.

too ... It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big ... and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between ... even before they let me out of bed, I stitched [Beloved] a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Suggs had ... that's a selfish pleasure I never had before ... I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out (162-3).

Escaping from Sweet Home was Sethe's first independent act and her success gave her a sense of achievement, but also amplitude: she perceives herself as able to protect and envelop her entire family.<sup>22</sup> "Look like I loved em more after ... Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (162). Her conception of freedom as having the space and time in Baby Suggs' house to sew her daughter a shift, poignantly reveals the deprivation of enslavement, the way in which it distorted Sethe's experience of motherhood, circumscribing her interactions with her children.<sup>23</sup> After she reached a domestic shelter which allowed her to call her family her own these relationships were transformed. Maternity and its operation in the realm of the household is hence central to Sethe's apprehension of both slavery and emancipation, and therefore to Morrison's exploration in *Beloved*.

124 was "a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove" (86-7). There Sethe was welcomed into a close and sustaining relationship with another black woman, her mother in law, and into the heart of a black neighbourhood:

[She] had twenty-eight days ... of unslaved life ... Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow right along with her own, which made it better ... Bit by bit, at 124 and ... along with the others, she had claimed herself (95).

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<sup>22</sup> The escape hence allowed Sethe to act autonomously, to claim her babies as her own, but it also encouraged her to assume a level of responsibility for their lives that would later have dangerous consequences. Her moving image of reunion is perhaps also one of engulfing possession?

<sup>23</sup> As Cooperman points out, "[w]hat for other women was 'drudgery', was for Sethe a sign of selfhood so intense, so precious that it symbolized, first her deepest love for her baby girl, and then a freedom she would kill for rather than lose". Cooperman, p.173.



Sharing in the experiences of other ex-slaves relieved the pain of Sethe's suffering and integrated her into a black community. Freedom on Bluestone Road brought her friendship and belonging, but also allowed her to assert a form of selfhood denied by slavery's drudgery, dehumanisation and proprietary relations. A month "of being part of a neighbourhood; of, in fact, having neighbours at all to call her own", in addition, made Sethe aware of a wider history of black struggle and activism (173).<sup>24</sup> Her time in Baby Suggs' felicitous domestic space hence recalls bell hooks' formulation of homeplace: "the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination".<sup>25</sup> Here then the sphere of the household assumes a set of meanings different to those that it held within the discourses of true womanhood. Indeed, for ex-slaves in *Beloved* it becomes a site of racial resistance as well as of maternal empowerment.

Sethe's idyllic respite, however, was shattered by an eruption of the past terrors of slavery, represented by the white master, into the very home where she had discovered her freedom. Faced with the return of her family into bondage and the invasion of the sanctuary she had found for it, Sethe made a harrowing pre-emptive strike to thwart schoolteacher's intentions.<sup>26</sup> The trauma and shock that precipitated her infanticide are emphasised within the composition of *Beloved* for when the boundaries of 124 are breached the narrative is ruptured as it abruptly

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<sup>24</sup> She learnt to participate in "discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's Ways and Negro pews; antislavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner's high-wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio, and the other weighty issues that held them in their chairs, scrapping the floorboards or pacing them in agony or exhilaration" (173).

<sup>25</sup> hooks, p.42. According to Susan Willis, "[a]s black women writers envision it, the utopian transformation of society depends on the radical reconstitution of domestic life and space. The future takes shape within the walls that have traditionally imprisoned women and defined their social labor". Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.159.

<sup>26</sup> The four white men who come on horseback to recapture her are reminiscent of the apocalyptic horsemen of the Book of Revelation and threaten the status of 124 as a haven. Homi Bhabha discusses the moment of her infanticide in terms of 'unhomeliness': "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting". "The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence". Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.9-11.

shifts to the perspectives of the slave catchers. The points of view of these white men, their language and apprehension of events, sharply contrast with other accounts of the episode (see 148-151). Morrison thus plays out a form of dislocation in her presentation of different discourses through focalization.<sup>27</sup>

Sethe's own perspective on her actions, whilst not rendering them less terrible, offers insight into her motivation:

The truth was simple ... when she saw them coming and recognised schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them ... where they would be safe (163).<sup>28</sup>

For the mother, her infanticide was about saving her children from Sweet Home, from the forms of violation and dehumanisation that she herself had experienced. Sethe's violent reaction to schoolteacher's invasion was an attempt to find her family a safe space beyond the reaches of slavery. Indeed, in her eyes it was an enactment of the motherly love, the capacity to protect her babies, previously denied by bondage.<sup>29</sup> Her attack, however, is not seen in the same way by others. As I will explore, Paul D not only understandably condemns her attempt to murder her children, but also fails to comprehend for a long time the specific

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<sup>27</sup> The white men, "schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff", refer to African Americans as "them", "coons" and "nigger[s]", and see the desperate actions of recaptured fugitive slaves as crazy and incomprehensible, not acknowledging the traumatising effects of slavery (148-151). schoolteacher's disappointment "that there [is] nothing ... left to claim" at 124 reveals his chief concern to be one of lost property (149). The sheriff meanwhile reads the infanticide as "testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred", seeing Sethe's attack as a resurgence of black savagery (151). The use of such perspectives, entirely dismissive of the selfhood of blacks, works to jolt the reader. See Vincent A. O'Keefe, 'Reading Rigor Mortis: Off Stage Violence and Excluded Middles "in" Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Morrison's *Beloved*', *African American Review*, 30, 4 (1996), 635-647 and James Phelan, 'Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading', *Style*, 32, 2 (1998), 318-333 for perceptive analyses of this narrative strategy.

<sup>28</sup> Description of the sensation of piercing needle beaks recalls again Harriet Jacobs' narrative: "for weeks I was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning". Jacobs, p.93.

<sup>29</sup> Morrison comments, "[s]he was trying to be a parent and a mother and have something to say about her children's lives in a slave system that said to blacks, 'You are not a parent, you are not a mother, you have nothing to do with your children'". Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison, In Her

reasons behind it. This is crucial to Morrison's depiction of their relationship and different experiences of slavery.

Eighteen years after her crime Sethe remains at 124, despite its haunting by the daughter that she killed there. The house is charged with meaning as the site of her violence, yet also as the space from which she turned back the master and the domestic realm where she first discovered freedom and belonging. On finding a home after escaping from slavery Sethe clings to it, and the shelter it provides her children, with a tenacity that is terrifying to others. Her occupation of 124 is hence linked to the particular oppression that she suffered as an enslaved woman and mother at Sweet Home. Uncomprehending of this, Paul D cannot at first make sense of her continued residency or her lethal love: "[t]his here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (164). It is only at the end of the novel that Morrison suggests a hopeful reconciliation between them, one achieved through the sharing of their ordeals, the placing of their stories side by side. For significantly on one point Sethe and Paul D do have exactly the same understanding: "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that* was freedom" (162).

I will now turn to *Beloved*'s portrayal of black male experiences, largely neglected by critical responses to the novel.<sup>30</sup> In particular I will examine the stories of Paul D and Stamp Paid, also briefly considering those of more peripheral male characters such as Sixo, Halle, Howard and Buglar. Morrison's depiction of the lives of black men furthers her exploration of how slavery caused dislocation from conventional gender roles and definitions. It also, however, I argue, interrogates patriarchy and illustrates how, to quote bell hooks,

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New Novel, Defends Women', with Mervyn Rothstein, *The New York Times*, 26 August 1987, C17.

<sup>30</sup> As April Lidinsky identifies, "while most critics have emphasised the matrilineal connections in *Beloved*, Morrison's text is also richly suggestive with regard to the various effects of slavery's disciplinary tactics on masculinity". April Lidinsky, 'Prophesying Bodies Calling for a Politics of Collectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *The Discourse of Slavery from Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, ed. by Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.191-216 (p.202). Deborah Sitter also notes that "[d]iscussions of manhood ... are notably absent from the ... commentary on *Beloved*". Deborah Ayer Sitter, 'The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*', *African American Review*, 26, 1 (1992), 17-29 (p.17). Sitter's article is an exception to this neglect.

“racism and sexism” can become “interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another”.<sup>31</sup>

From the start *Beloved* offers a vision of African American men on the move. In fact, the first paragraph places considerable emphasis on the flight of Howard and Buglar from their home on Bluestone Road. Both of Sethe’s sons “had run away by the time they were thirteen years old”, “first one brother and then the next ... snatched up his shoes, and crept away” (3). The novel’s opening hence not only sets up a sedentary household of women, but also presents young black males exiting the domestic space and setting off into the wider world. This motif resonates throughout *Beloved* and corresponds with Morrison’s discussion of the mobility of black men: “Perhaps it’s because they don’t have a land, they don’t have dominion ... that going from town to town or place to place looking out and over and beyond ... is one of the monumental themes in black literature about men ... the leaving home”.<sup>32</sup> Here the author suggests a link between the historical displacement of slaves from their own land, their experience of exile, and the adoption by African American men of a wandering lifestyle. This account distinguishes such patterns in black literature from white American narratives of male travel or adventure. On learning of Howard and Buglar’s choice, Paul D endorses it, concluding “[p]robably best ... If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up” (10). His association of staying in one place with being trapped equates movement with freedom in a manner that reinforces the specificity of black male mobility indicated in Morrison’s commentary above.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> hooks, p.59. As Laura Doyle observes “[t]he ex-slave characters in *Beloved* ... must negotiate the gender ideologies that work in tandem with those of race and slavery to disrupt the black American emplacement in the world”. Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.209.

<sup>32</sup> Morrison, ‘Intimate Things in Place’, pp.25-6.

<sup>33</sup> Towards the end of Morrison’s text Denver offers a supplementary perspective on her brothers’ motives for leaving. She speculates, “[m]aybe it was getting that close to dying made them want to fight the War. That’s what they told me they were going to do. I guess they rather be around killing men than killing women” (205). Her narrative reveals that Howard and Buglar were attracted by military conflict and all its mythologised connotations of heroism and (especially for African Americans during the Civil War) liberation. As young runaways they were drawn to the excitement of war, finding this form of ‘legitimate’ male violence preferable to that perpetrated by their mother.

*Beloved*'s opening reference to Sethe's sons' departure points towards my main investigation of Morrison's portrayal of black male identity through the character of Paul D. Arriving on Sethe's porch in 1873, Paul D is introduced as "the last of the Sweet Home men" and "a walking man" (7 & 46). Indeed, he has been on the road for eighteen years yet still refuses a basin to soak his feet for there is "[a] whole lot more tramping they got to do yet" (7). Although he seeks out Sethe on Bluestone Road, at this stage Paul D still does not believe that "he [can] live with ... any woman for over two or three months. That was about as long as he could abide one place ... walking off when he got ready was the only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains" (40). His inability to settle therefore is directly linked to the traumatic impact of slavery, in particular, his troubling memories of confinement on the chain gang. Paul D tells Sethe "I been heading in this direction for seven years. Walking all around this place. Upstate, downstate, east, west; I been in territory ain't got no name, never staying nowhere long" (46). Despite his nomadism, his movement towards 124, although somewhat indirect, perhaps signals the potential of this space as a home for him.

Displaced from his parents by slavery, "Mother. Father. Didn't remember the one. Never saw the other", Paul D grew up at Sweet Home (219). As a male slave on this small farm, surrounded by his half-brothers and friends, governed by a 'liberal' master, he did develop some sense of belonging. Like the farm name, this, however, proved to be a cruel fallacy. Later on the road Paul D was fascinated by, and envious of, African American families that had somehow managed to remain intact: "Each time he discovered large families of black people he made them identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who" for "[n]othing like that had ever been his" (219). Yet he himself "wanted simply to move, go, pick up one day and be somewhere else the next", was "resigned to life without aunts, cousins, children. Even a woman, until Sethe" (221). Paul D's wonder at whole black families and his own orphanhood both highlight the dislocatory manner in which the institution of slavery worked, and provide a context for the transience of the African American men that Morrison portrays. Here then the travelling theme is not just about

“[c]uriosity, what’s around the corner ... what’s down the track”, it also implies the history of a people made homeless.<sup>34</sup>

Paul D’s experience is reflective, and representative, of a wider situation that emerged during and after the American Civil War. Indeed, he encountered a whole underworld of African American vagrants:

Odd clusters and strays of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenectady to Jackson. Dazed but insistent, they searched each other out for word of a cousin, an aunt, a friend ... solitary, hunted and hunting for, were men, men, men. Forbidden public transportation, chased by debt and filthy ‘talking sheets’, they followed secondary routes, scanned the horizon for signs and counted heavily on each other. Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another (52-3).

This desolate vision of black male life corresponds with the picture painted by W. E. B. DuBois in his commentary on the era of the Freedmen’s Bureau in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here DuBois refers to the “horde of starving vagabonds, homeless, helpless, and pitiable” left behind by the war.<sup>35</sup> Morrison poses Paul D’s unsettled and fugitive existence within such a landscape, an inhospitable America that tutors former slaves to “Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on” (66). Displaced from family and lacking domains of their own, black men were thus denied belonging (and patriarchal authority).

*Beloved* does, however, offer an alternative prospect of home in its description of Paul D’s numerous attempts to flee slavery:

In all [his] escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it ... Its graveyards and low-lying rivers. Or just a house – solitary under a chinaberry tree ... Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it (268).

This passage conveys the black man’s dislocation in America yet also his helpless attraction to the continent’s beauty. It perhaps, in addition, recalls

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<sup>34</sup> Morrison, ‘Intimate Things in Place’, p.26.

<sup>35</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p.24.

Morrison's idealised portrayal of the Southern woods in *Song of Solomon*. America's terrain (here feminised) offered Paul D shelter and sustenance, indeed he learnt it intimately. Even on the prison farm, where "mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon – everything belonged to the men who had the guns", where he had "neither the right nor the permission", the slave still found that he wanted to claim a piece of this land as a home (162). At Sweet Home he cherished the tree he named Brother and in Alfred, Georgia, where "a big love ... would split you wide open", kept his affection small and secret, "[g]rass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants" (162). This evocation of landscape, the way in which it moves Paul D despite being the site of his dispossession, offers a different perspective on his travels and locates in the natural world the possibility of belonging.

When Paul D first enters 124 his presence enables Sethe to "[t]rust ... and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men [is] there to catch her if she [sinks]" (18). He offers her a future, "[w]indows suddenly had view", reawakens her desire and ends the household's isolation (39). As I will explore, however, Morrison's narrative reveals this promisingly caring black man to remain trapped within damaging definitions of masculinity. When Sethe explains how she escaped from Sweet Home, Paul D is "proud of her and annoyed by her. Proud she had done it; annoyed that she had not needed Halle or him in the doing" (8). He partly resents the strength and autonomy of the black woman. He is also doubtful of Sethe's current independence, managing a household with "[n]o man" (10). Yet his own arrival does not complete a previously lacking home for the women "[are] a family somehow and he [is] not the head of it" (132). At first Paul D had thought that Sethe "lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons ... she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do" (164). In fact, this patriarchal attitude is strongly countered by Sethe's own narrative perspective. Whereas Paul D thinks that she should leave her haunted home, as discussed earlier, Sethe defines it as a space of security and resistance.

The two characters hence have different conceptions of freedom and these, I propose, result from their different experiences of oppression.<sup>36</sup>

As I will explore, Paul D largely apprehended enslavement as emasculation, an interpretation obviously not pertinent to Sethe's form of subjugation. His experience of slavery, in addition, engendered an assumption of the patriarchal ideology of his masters, something revealed, I argue, when he condemns Sethe's infanticide. Although his horror at her act is warranted, the manner in which he reproaches her recalls the discourses of schoolteacher, the lessons in which his nephews listed the female slave's characteristics. For Paul D scathingly reminds Sethe "[y]ou got two feet ... not four" (165). This comment, although appearing to assert her humanity, in fact raises the possibility of the black woman's inhumanity. Indeed, Paul D's denunciation of Sethe as monstrous, aligning her with animality, echoes the terminology of the system of racial hierarchy to which they have both been subject. Yet it is an insult directed at a black woman by a black man. This incident leads to a rift between the characters and Sethe's conclusion, "Paul D ... gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news: of clabber, of iron, of roosters' smiling, but when he heard *her* news, he counted her feet and didn't even say goodbye" (189). Only later when both have reached a better understanding of each other's suffering can their relationship be repaired.

I will now consider more fully Paul D's encounter with slavery. Unlike Sethe's, his memories centre on the close-knit community that the male slaves of Sweet Home formed. Members of this fraternal group worked the fields together, congregated under the tree that Paul D called Brother together and shared the honour of being named Sweet Home *men* (not "[y]oung boys, old boys, picky" or "stroppin boys" like other black males) (10). On Mr. Garner's

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<sup>36</sup> The distinctiveness of Sethe's experience of slavery is illustrated when, in telling of her violation at Sweet Home, she emphasises the theft of her breast milk whereas Paul D focuses on the fact that she was whipped whilst pregnant (see 17). Sethe also asserts that men *cannot* "know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full", so defining her ordeal as radically different to that of the male (16). As Lidinsky observes, *Beloved* "explore[s] the specifically gendered trauma of certain effects of slavery's degradation, such as the reification and undermining of cultural concepts of 'manhood' at Sweet Home, and the stealing of Sethe's milk by Schoolteacher's boys". Lidinsky, p.205.



farm, Paul D “grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to” (125). The male slaves of Sweet Home were hence accorded an unusual degree of respect, responsibility and autonomy, yet the pride fostered in their manhood could not extend to Sethe nor allow her a corresponding sense of self-worth. And ultimately their own enslaved status was not altered by such differentiation from other blacks. A fact Paul D later discovered when he learnt “the dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future” as another man’s property (226).

Permitted a degree of independence, the Sweet Home men did not associate their position with degradation, yet their exceptionality was predicated solely on the word of their master. And after emancipation Paul D remained caught within such definitions, wondering “[i]s that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?”(125). As *Beloved* reveals, the categorisation of the farm’s slaves as men worked to bolster Garner’s power, for he was proud to be man enough, “tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men” (11). “Deferring to his slaves’ opinions did not deprive him of authority” (125). Indeed, in a system of male competition the master’s reputation was enhanced by his ability to control five, not boys, but men at Sweet Home. This paradigm of masculinist domination both gave the slaves a belief in their manhood and trapped them in the discourses of a racialised patriarchy which negated it. It even implied a struggle enacted over the female body, the potential vulnerability of Mrs. Garner’s white womanhood to black violation (see 10-11).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Garner brags to his peers “‘Y’all got boys ... at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em’ ... ‘Ain’t no nigger men’. ‘Not if you scared, they ain’t ... But if you a man yourself, you’ll want your niggers to be men too’. ‘I wouldn’t have no nigger men round my wife’. It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. ‘Neither would I’ he said ... and there was always a pause before ... whoever it was got the meaning. Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased” (10-11). The fear of the black male rapist, the potency of the male slave who has not been emasculated, implied here is turned to Garner’s advantage for he is able to control his men single-handed. Garner also, however, insults his neighbour by insinuating that his own wife might not be entirely trustworthy around “nigger men”.

The male slaves of Sweet Home, raised to take pride in their manhood, adopted an ideology of machismo: “so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves”, when Sethe first arrived on the farm “each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her” (10). Yet despite “dreaming of rape” they all endured a year of waiting, “[t]he restraint they had exercised possible only because they were Sweet Home men” (10). Here once more the sexual possession of women becomes the means by which manhood is played out. Yet in this case it is self-control that distinguishes the slaves as men. What is troubling about Paul D’s memory of this episode is his suggestion that they held back because of the naming done by a white man, that if they had not been Sweet Home men they would have raped.

“Isolated in a wonderful lie ... Protected and convinced they were special”, the male slaves’ sense of superiority was shattered when Garner’s sudden death revealed the illusion of their domain (221).

It was schoolteacher who taught them ... they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible people spoke (125).

Within the wider institution of slavery, as the new master’s arrival informed them, black men were not men, they were labelled inhuman and denied a voice. Exposed to the truth of their subjugated position, the Sweet Home ‘men’ experienced degradation and emasculation. Indeed, they found themselves to be considered castrated livestock rather than “responsible people”, “gelded” animals lacking rational thought and language.<sup>38</sup> Therefore just as the male slaves’ affirmative sense of identity was founded on manliness, so their dehumanisation was experienced as an unmaning.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere Morrison observes “collapsing persons into animals prevents human contact and exchange, equating speech with grunts or other animal sounds closes off the possibility of communication”. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), p.68.

<sup>39</sup> Most critics have failed to recognise Mr. Garner’s complicity in this crisis of manhood. Samuels and Hudson-Weems, for example, refer to Garner’s treatment of the Sweet Home men as “altruistic”, noting only “the devastating manner in which [Paul D] was later physically and psychologically emasculated by schoolteacher”. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p.124.

Years later Paul D is still left questioning his own manhood, a victim of patriarchal slavery:

Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces ... At the peak of his strength, taller than tall men ... they clipped him ... First his shotgun, then his thoughts, for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes ... [now] he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave ... concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself ... Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway – before Sweet Home – without Garner? ... Did a white man saying it make it so? (220).

Here Paul D perceives how his previous status as a man was predicated on Garner's word and Garner's isolated regime. He recognises slavery's agenda of infantilisation, yet still doubts *himself* for any assurance that he once possessed has been destroyed, compounding his homelessness. Paul D has internalised the master's discourse and hence cannot think outside of his definition of manhood (and its opposite, emasculation).<sup>40</sup> He fails to realise that “before Sweet Home – without Garner” he would not have been prompted to evaluate himself in such a way. Significantly he remains haunted by the farm's strutting rooster, Mister, whose comparative liberty and machismo brought him to a realisation of his own abjection. He tells Sethe, “Mister, he looked so ... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher ... I was something less than a chicken sitting ... on a tub” (72). Morrison hence uses the arrogant (yet also ridiculous and sexualised) cock to figure Paul D's humiliation, his diminished sense of worth. Her novel, I propose, questions the historical delineation of enslavement as emasculation, and broader ideologies within which an assertion of patriarchal authority is seen as the solution to situations of racist oppression.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sitter writes, “the qualities Paul D associates with manliness originate in the dominant culture of the white slaveholder Mr. Garner”. Sitter, p.24.

<sup>41</sup> A ‘crisis’ of black masculinity was central to the findings of the Moynihan Report of 1965. According to Deborah Gray White, “[n]oting that ‘the fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife’, Moynihan found the black woman's role debilitating for black men, so much so that he advised black men to seek refuge in the armed forces, a world which, according to Moynihan, offered a ‘dramatic and desperately needed change’, because it was ‘a world away from women’”. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), p.166.

Paul D's need for mobility as proof of freedom is also explained by his experiences of slavery. After Sweet Home he was sent to a prison farm in Alfred, Georgia and confined in a wooden cage fitted into a ditch "five feet deep, five feet wide" (106). This "grave calling itself quarters" not only echoes the treatment of animals, but in addition evokes the cramped conditions of a Middle Passage crossing (106). Indeed, Paul D's trauma was manifested in physical convulsions.<sup>42</sup> His memories of being linked up to "one thousand feet of the best hand-forged chain in Georgia" lead to his later inability to settle in any one place (107). At the camp Paul D and his forty-six fellow prisoners were subject to a strict regime that denied individuality and demanded automatic obedience (see 107). They were also regularly forced to oblige "the whim of a guard, or two, or three", performing oral sex for their white jailors, or else choosing "gun shot in [the] head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with [them] to Jesus" (108). This sexual abuse further dehumanised and humiliated the black inmates. Indeed, through it Morrison introduces another aspect of domination, male rape. For the chain gang slaves were emasculated by a sex act which they interpreted as forcing them into a feminised role. They were physically violated (and therefore castrated) by their white guards.<sup>43</sup> The resultant black male degradation was compounded by the fact that it was exacted by "[l]ittle men ... men who knew their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed" (162).

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<sup>42</sup> "Out of sight of Mister's sight, away ... from the smiling boss of roosters, Paul D began to tremble ... It felt like rippling - gentle at first then wild ... By the time they unhitched him ... the roiling blood was shaking him to and fro" (106-7).

<sup>43</sup> In her essay 'Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*' Pamela Barnett notes how critics have treated "Paul D's experience on the chain gang as unrelatable", "many write of his violation euphemistically if at all". Quoted by Carl Plasa, *Toni Morrison Beloved* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.83. She goes on to observe "[t]hough he is victimized as a black man in a racist system, he articulates his sexually subordinate position in terms of gender". Quoted by Plasa, p.83. Yet, as Lee Edelman points out, although the narrative "portray[s] neither guard nor prisoner, neither white man nor black, as 'being' homosexual, homosexuality itself, in the heterosexual world view compulsively intent on totalising it, comes to 'mean' ... the violent disappropriation of masculine authority that underlies the paranoid relation of black and white in our modern, 'racially' polarized, patriarchal social formation". Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.54.

The prisoners' reaction to their oppression is signalled by the way in which they perceived their quarry work as a respite that allowed them to beat away at women, children and bosses:

More than the rest, they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it ... The successful ones – the ones who had been there enough years to have maimed, mutilated, maybe even buried her – kept watch over the others who were still in her cock-teasing hug, caring and looking forward, remembering and looking back (109).

The male chain gang hence gendered the deceptive temptress who led them on as female, as a woman whom they assaulted. This conception of "[l]ife" as a "cock-teasing" flirt reveals how the imprisoned black men displaced anger at their mistreatment onto a demonised femininity. Unable to beat the white men who shamed them, the slaves instead directed their rage and aggression towards a figure labelled as whore.

The ambivalent and dislocated position of *Beloved's* African American men is perhaps best summed up by Paul D's experience of the Civil War. Wanting to help free his people and carve out a space for himself in the land of his enslavement, Paul D ran "away from the Northpoint Bank and Railway to join the 44<sup>th</sup> Colored Regiment" (267). In the confusion of war he found instead another unit, one that "fell apart before it got started on the question of whether the soldiers should have weapons or not" (267). This dispute over the capability and reliability of black men to carry arms was symptomatic of the racism pervasive throughout even the side advocating the abolition of slavery (further evidenced by the fact that they were "paid less than white soldiers") (209). Allowed only to "clean, haul, and build things", most of the black regiment were "left to their own devices with bitterness for pay" (267-8). Paul D was recaptured and sold to the Rebels for "slave-work" (268). He therefore ironically ended up on "both sides of the War", condemned to assist the Confederacy prolong his own enslavement (267). Assigned to sort the dead, he was "shamed ... to feel pity for what he imagined were the sons of the guards in Alfred, Georgia" (268). Paul D's military experience thus makes a mockery of the idealistic ambitions of Howard and Buglar who, it is suggested, ran away to

fight the war (see 205). For even on the cusp of emancipation, the black man was pressed into the service of his enemies.

By the time that Paul D reached 124 each “doubt, regret and every single unasked question was packed away” (221). Indeed, his repression of his memories of suffering and the anxieties engendered by slavery is figured using the image of a “tobacco tin lodged in his chest” (113). Beloved, however, forces him to confront the contents of this “tin buried ... where a red heart used to be” (72-3). She begins by making Paul D restless in Sethe’s home: “[a]t the very time and place he wanted to take root - she moved him. From room to room. Like a rag doll” (221). Then she starts to visit him at night, compelling him to “[f]uck ... her when he was convinced he didn’t want to” (126). Her mysterious power causes the “flakes of rust” to fall “away from the seams of his tobacco tin” until the lid gives and his “[r]ed heart” reawakens (117). Beloved therefore opens a closed part of Paul D, unlocking his memories and emotions. Her control of him, however, also brings great shame. Humiliated by his lack of free will, he is prompted to wonder “if schoolteacher was right” regarding his manhood (126). And scorns his capitulation to Beloved as “some womanish need” like that of “Lot’s wife” (117).<sup>44</sup> Paul D’s solution to the emasculation he experiences, “picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter”, is to ask Sethe to have his child, seeing this as “a way to ... document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell – all in one” (126-8). Only at the novel’s conclusion does he move beyond such a narrow understanding of male identity.

Beloved’s manipulation of Paul D makes him feel inadequate, reminds him of his suppressed insecurities. Yet eventually he perceives how his own humiliation prompted him to turn on Sethe and condemn her as other than human. By the end of the narrative he recognises “[h]ow fast he moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love” (165). A need to

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<sup>44</sup> As Andrew Schopp identifies, “Paul D’s investment in patriarchal definitions of masculinity would necessitate his horror at having his (male) agency stripped away”. Andrew Schopp, ‘Narrative Control and Subjectivity: Dismantling Safety in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, in *Understanding Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms of the works*

assuage his guilt, and banish self-doubt, over what happened with Beloved had shaped his uncircumspect denunciation of Sethe's infanticide. Yet Beloved also enables Paul D to confront his past and the anxieties engendered during enslavement. The otherworldly figure thus allows him to reassess his reaction to Sethe, facilitating new insight and therefore a second reunion with her.<sup>45</sup>

The characters of Sixo and Halle provide further models of black masculinity within *Beloved*. Sixo was the wildest of the Sweet Home slaves, "indigo with a flame-red tongue", still in possession of an African language (21). At night he walked to visit a girl who lived thirty miles away and danced in the woods "to keep his bloodlines open" (25). He also questioned schoolteacher's definitions, refused literacy (not wishing to "forget things he shouldn't"), and died defiant, rejoicing that the mother of his unborn child had escaped (208). Indeed, whilst being burnt to death Sixo sang with "hatred so loose it was juba" (227). He is hence presented as a figure of rebellion, less assimilated than the Garner brothers. It was Sixo, in addition, however, who was most sensitive towards Sethe's isolated position as a mother at Sweet Home. He doctored her injured son and offered perceptive advice, earning the tribute "Sixo was the biggest help ... Taught me a lot" (160-1). He thus lived uncircumscribed by the master's version of manhood which left Paul D's sense of self obliterated. Significantly it is only when Paul D recalls Sixo's relationship to the thirty-mile woman at the end of the text that he finally realises how he feels about Sethe.

Halle, unlike Sixo, was literate and numerate and so was able to buy Baby Suggs' freedom. Indeed, he "gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see [his mother] sit down for a change" (11). To Sethe he "was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim" (25). Their union of sibling equality thus offered an alternative to

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by the Nobel Prize-Winning Author, ed. by Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 2000), pp.204-230 (p.222).

<sup>45</sup> Weinstein writes, "[o]wned and manhandled by slave owners, forced to realize his radical impotence, he sees he cannot be a man on the terms proposed by Garner. If he would become a man on other terms, he must yield up his white model and its judgemental code – cease viewing Sethe as a creature with four legs, not two – and begin to re-conceive manhood". Philip M. Weinstein, *What Else But Love?: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.127.

patriarchal dominion. Throughout the narrative present, however, Halle is absent, causing what Morrison has described as familial “carnage”. “[T]he loss of that man to his mother, to his wife, to his children ... is a serious loss and the reader has to be able to feel it ... He has to be *not* there ... You couldn’t ask for a stronger man. He sold his life so that the women and children could be free”.<sup>46</sup> For not only did Halle barter his spare time for Baby Suggs’ emancipation, but he also restrained himself from revenging the nephews’ assault on his wife, so leaving her and the children with a chance of escape. Accepting his helplessness in the face of Sethe’s violation, remaining hidden in the barn, he “broke ... like a twig” but refused to betray their plans (68). When Paul D saw him last, Halle was “sitting by the churn ... butter all over his face ... because the milk they took was on his mind” and, whilst such madness cannot be asserted as a strategy of resistance, this black man does, in some respects, provide an affirmative model (69-70).<sup>47</sup>

The character of Stamp Paid, a “sly, steely, old black man: agent, fisherman, boatman, tracker, savior, spy”, extends *Beloved*’s reconceptualisation of manhood (136). It was he who ferried Sethe and Denver across the Ohio River to freedom and then, to celebrate the miracle of their escape, found blackberries that tasted so good eating them was “like being in church” (136). Before the war he worked for the Underground Railroad and later continued to serve the black community.

Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master’s son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to who could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn’t owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off (184-5).

Confronted with his powerlessness to stop the theft of his wife by a white man, Stamp Paid suffered the loss of the woman he loved, but also the humiliation of

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<sup>46</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, with Marsha Darling, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp.246-254 (p.250).

<sup>47</sup> Weinstein reads Halle rather differently: “when a male slave is confronted with the utter incapacity of his will to affect his reality, forced to watch impotently while his wife is beaten and



not being able to prevent it from happening. As he sees it, he “handed her over” in that he did not kill the master’s son (or his own wife) to halt the concubinage. Faced with the choice of murder (leading to his own certain death) or submission to cuckholdom (surrendering his partner and pride as a man) Stamp paid what he saw as the higher price. He did what his wife asked and endured the ignominy and pain, he stayed alive, and with this act cancelled all debts. Later he devoted himself to “helping [others] pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak” (185).

Through Stamp Paid’s story Morrison explores the widespread practice of white masters taking enslaved black women as their mistresses. Such sexual coercion is also referred to in the abuse suffered by Ella, Sethe’s mother and Baby Suggs. Yet here the situation is presented from the perspective of a male slave who faced his wife’s enforced concubinage to another man. Stamp Paid tells Paul D, “I never touched her all that time. Not once. Almost a year ... I should have killed him. She said no ... Vashti and me was in the fields together in the day and every now and then she be gone all night. I never touched her and damn me if I spoke three words to her a day” (232-3). Stamp’s narrative conveys his hurt and helplessness, his angry restraint and the distance brought about between him and Vashti.<sup>48</sup> Caught within a system of racial slavery that denied him patriarchal authority, the ability to protect his wife, Stamp Paid experienced an unmaning at the master’s son’s control of Vashti’s sexuality.<sup>49</sup> Following this disempowerment, on Vashti’s return Stamp Paid “looked at the back of her neck”, her “real small neck”, and decided to “snap it” (233). Tormented by the suffering and emasculation caused by white domination, the enslaved man hence turned toward the black woman (whose existence as a sexual being beyond his

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milked, he becomes ... simultaneously not-male and insane (his identity no longer his own), a creature smeared in butter”. Weinstein, p.99.

<sup>48</sup> In desperation and the hope of stirring up some intervention he even spoke to “the young master’s wife”: “I thought she might stop it, but it went right on” (233). Here the white woman thus proves to be as lacking in agency as the black man.

<sup>49</sup> As Trudier Harris points out, “manhood is the focus of the issue. The master’s son uses Vashti to assert/declare his manhood; that act simultaneously signals to Joshua that he, a slave, can never be a man. Joshua can neither claim nor protect hearth or wife, for the ownership of the wife’s most private parts are the privilege of the slaveholder”. Trudier Harris, ‘Escaping Slavery but not

possession caused his humiliation) to vent his rage. Stamp, however, did not act on this impulse, instead changing his name.<sup>50</sup> He therefore refused to perpetrate violence in a struggle over the female body in an attempt to assert his manhood. Rather Stamp Paid set an alternative example, rejecting such a masculinist paradigm. And his story of black male trial and reinvention, I suggest, proves instructive for Paul D.

Although he is eventually disillusioned by the violence of Reconstruction, I propose that Stamp Paid offers a revisionary model of black manhood. In *Beloved* the effects of slavery on male identity are explored through various experiences of emasculation. Morrison thus alludes to a thematic that featured strongly in earlier texts by African American men and that has also been a concern of other black writers such as Frantz Fanon.<sup>51</sup> Whereas Fanon, like some of the authors of the slave narratives, perceived the assertion of a virile, even aggressive version of black manhood as the route to achieving decolonisation and freedom, Morrison, however, formulates a different solution.<sup>52</sup> When Stamp Paid's wife was taken from him by a white man he did not turn to violence, but rather endured the pain of losing the woman he loved and the impotence of being helpless to protect her from sexual violation. At one point his rage at such humiliation was directed towards Vashti, yet he did not act on it. Unlike the protagonist of W. E. B. DuBois' story 'The Coming of John', Stamp did not engage in a battle over possession of the black woman's body as a

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its Images', in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.330-341 (p.331).

<sup>50</sup> As Weinstein notes, "Stamp Paid's self-ordained new name literally announces that he has paid all debts ... but it does its real work figuratively – enabling him to conceive himself anew, absorb this blow, and become free again". Weinstein, p.71.

<sup>51</sup> According to Verges, Frantz Fanon found the colonised black man to be "feminised and emasculated". Françoise Verges, 'Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonisation: Fanon and Freedom', in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. by Alan Read (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), pp.47-75 (p.61). See also my earlier reference to Hazel Carby's reading of male slaves narratives.

<sup>52</sup> Fanon writes, "[t]he Negro is a toy in the white man's hands, so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes". Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.140. See also Verges, p.61. Frederick Douglass' slave narrative emphasises the importance of a fight in which he physically overpowered his master: the violence marked "a glorious resurrection", a "turning-point", it revived his sense of "manhood" and desire to be free. Frederick Douglass, 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself', in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. MacKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp.302-369 (pp.343-344).

means to assert his will and gain “self respect in his own black manhood”.<sup>53</sup> Whilst, according to Hazel Carby, in *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois attempted to confront “claims that white male aggression [was] met only by black male passivity” by depicting the struggle of men “over the control of female sexuality”, Morrison’s contemporary narrative, I argue, beats a new path.<sup>54</sup>

In previous male-authored texts the black woman who submitted to her white master’s wishes committed an act of betrayal which compromised the black man’s masculinity.<sup>55</sup> *Beloved*, however, rewrites this pattern of demonising femininity. For in Morrison’s novel neither Sethe nor Vashti are ultimately blamed for their violation by white men or the emasculation that their husbands experience. Indeed, Stamp Paid first restrains himself from aggressive retaliation at Vashti’s request, and then renames himself to avoid turning upon her.<sup>56</sup> Hence the narrative holds up the black man who resists resorting to violence, who doesn’t self-destruct, and who refrains from attributing his degradation to black women, as all the more courageous. This constitutes a rejection of the ideology of domain, machismo and patriarchy offered by Garner and schoolteacher.

By the end of *Beloved* Paul D has re-evaluated himself and his relationship to Sethe, caring finally about “how he left and why. When he looks at himself through Garner’s eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo’s another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed” (267). Reflecting on his departure from 124 and his denunciation of Sethe, Paul D recognises that he rehearsed the labelling of the slave master when he counted the black woman’s feet. According to Sixo’s model of manhood he acted in a manner both censorious and hypocritical, displacing his own guilt by condemning a woman for hers. Rather than supporting Sethe, sharing her burden as she shared his, Paul D resorted to a discourse that dehumanised her. Leaving Garner (and his patriarchal definitions) aside, Paul D sees that his behaviour was despicable,

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<sup>53</sup> Carby, *Race Men*, p.25. See DuBois, p.179.

<sup>54</sup> Carby, *Race Men*, p.25.

<sup>55</sup> See Carby, *Race Men*, p.38.

<sup>56</sup> Aoi Mori interprets this plot somewhat differently: “Just as the biblical Vashti is divorced by her husband for refusing his request to unveil before his revelling company, Morrison’s Vashti is dismissed by her husband when she is not able to be loyal to him”. Aoi Mori, *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p.81.

springing from his own sense of shame. Whereas he previously thought that Sethe's life, "getting in it and letting it get in him had set him up for [a] fall", Paul D now wants to be a part of the black woman's world (221). He hence visits her, offering to rub, not count, her feet and once more bringing hope of a shared homeplace. In addition, the possibility that Sethe may too have reached a new apprehension of her past and her reaction to slavery's oppression is suggested at the end of the novel. When Paul D tells her "[y]ou your best thing, Sethe" she replies "Me? Me?", perhaps indicating an emerging sense of self not defined only in terms of protecting her children (273). Indeed, Paul D optimistically declares, "*me and you ... got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow*" [my emphasis] (273).<sup>57</sup>

The way in which Paul D's transformation is effected, at least partially, by the examples of Halle, Sixo and Stamp Paid which work to undo the destructive paradigms of Garner, schoolteacher and Alfred, Georgia is illustrated by the narrative conclusion.<sup>58</sup> For as Paul D struggles to face Sethe, "[s]uddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about the Thirty-Mile Woman. 'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order'" (272-3). Thus Sixo gives Paul D the language necessary for him to understand his relationship to Sethe. Thinking back to his degradation at Sweet Home, he recalls the black woman's "tenderness about his neck jewellery ... How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast" (273). He remembers Sethe's sensitivity to his humiliation, declining to see him reduced to the status of livestock, allowing him to retain his humanity. Finally then Paul D recognises female identity as non-threatening, not an agent of emasculation, but a force alert to his suffering that could help him to compose, to gather together, his own selfhood as a black man. He concludes, "[o]nly this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers" (273). With this wish Paul D echoes the black woman's realisation, voiced much

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<sup>57</sup> Morrison comments, "there is the possibility between Sethe and Paul D of regaining life. After going through all the trauma, he comes back". Morrison, 'Interview', with Carabi, p.89.

<sup>58</sup> Morrison has described Paul D as "a favorite character ... because he was complicated, vulnerable, strong and he evolved", so hinting at his transformation. Toni Morrison, 'Transcript',

earlier in the text, that “[h]er story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again” (99). His gaze, described by Sethe as “soft in a waiting kind of way ... not judging her ... not loving or passionate, but interested”, perhaps, in addition, evokes the onetime union of Halle and Sethe, a relationship based upon mutuality, not “a man’s laying claim” (25). Indeed, at the end of the novel, as Nellie Y. McKay observes, “Morrison’s revised model of the home rejects the patriarchal model by redefining manhood and ... suggest[ing] a more secure communal space where women and men share themselves through their stories”.<sup>59</sup>

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21 January 1998, 24 April 2001,

<[www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html](http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html)>

<sup>59</sup> Nellie Y. McKay, ‘Introduction’, in *Toni Morrison’s Beloved A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.3-19 (p.17). In an article considering the resolution of *Beloved* Mary Carden writes, “[t]he novel’s action concludes with the projection of a happily-ever-after romance scenario. For Sethe and Paul D, a scenario loaded with possibilities for both resistance and reinscription of the gender role expectations that have consistently failed them”. Mary Paniccia Carden, ‘Models of Memory and Romance: The Dual Endings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45, 4 (1999), 401-427 (p.402). Meanwhile Keenan proposes, “Paul D’s final acceptance of Sethe’s ‘rough solution’ to the threat of slavery, and his desire ‘to put his story next to hers’ should not be taken as an assertion of heterosexual romance; rather it embodies the black man’s acceptance of the black woman’s same-but-different history which should no longer be subsumed within his”. Keenan, ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-appropriating the Past’, p.161.

## II. “Shuttles in the rocking loom of history”: Figuring the Middle Passage

Toni Morrison’s proposition that “modern life begins with slavery ... slavery broke the world in half” is perhaps most extensively explored and clearly enacted in *Beloved*.<sup>60</sup> For this novel depicts the immediate impact of slavery on the lives of its characters, their experiences of displacement, disruption, dissolution and loss, as well as the institution’s ongoing repercussions. Central to its portrayal of this African American modernity, I suggest, is the violent dislocation of the Middle Passage. I will next examine the significance of this crossing within the text, considering symbolic evocations of displacement and exchange between Africa and the Americas.<sup>61</sup> This part of my chapter will also refer to Paul Gilroy’s theory of a black Atlantic world as an enabling spatial paradigm.<sup>62</sup>

*Beloved*, I argue, offers an investigation of not just the legacies of North American slavery, but also those of the transatlantic traversal that engendered the black diaspora. The novel, in addition, figures reconnections back over the ocean that deny the Middle Passage its one way trajectory. Taking this suggestion yet further, Carl Pedersen proposes that for African American and Caribbean writers “the Middle Passage emerges as more of a bridge than a breach, a space-in-between where memory entails reconstructing the horrors of the voyage westward and retracing the journey of Africans to the Americas”.<sup>63</sup> Certainly the rupture of forced exile from a homeland requires examination in terms of severances but also survivals. My focus here will be the text’s

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<sup>60</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Living Memory: a meeting with Toni Morrison’, in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture*, by Paul Gilroy (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), pp.175-182 (p.178).

<sup>61</sup> The Middle Passage has long featured as an ambiguous trope in the American literary imagination. Indeed, Aldon Nielsen devotes over seventy pages to exploring diverse representations of the crossing in *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994) and Wolfgang Binder constructs a chronological literary history of its haunting configuration in his essay ‘Uses of Memory: the Middle Passage in African American Literature’, in *Slavery in the Americas*, ed. by Wolfgang Binder (Würzburg: Konigshausen & Nemann, 1993), pp.539-564. Carl Pedersen also surveys various depictions of the passage touching on those by Delany, Braithwaite, Walcott, Equiano, Douglass and Johnson among others in an article called ‘Sea Changes: The Middle Passage and the Transatlantic Imagination’, in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African-American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.42-51.

<sup>62</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> Pedersen, p.43.

remembering of the traffic of the slave trade and its sketching of a map compatible with Robert Hayden's imagery of "[s]huttles in the rocking loom of history". Despite foregrounding the impact of slavery on the personal and familial lives of American born black men and women during the mid 1800s, *Beloved*, dedicated to the "60 million and more" Africans who died whilst crossing the Atlantic, offers a persistent subtext of allusion to the Middle Passage.<sup>64</sup> As William Handley writes "Morrison's haunting epitaph suggests an allegorical reading of *Beloved* as embodying a longer African history and of the ruptures in Sethe's family as a repetition of the rupture from Africa".<sup>65</sup> Not only does the narrative inform readers of the ocean voyage ordeal of Sethe's mother, but it also provides an oblique glimpse of the physical experience of a slave ship through the figure of *Beloved*. Even Paul D whilst questioning his manhood wonders how he would have withstood, "God help him", the horrors of "the boat" (220).

In relating to Sethe the tale of her mother, Nan offers a short account of the Middle Passage: "She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away'" (62). Nan's story does not describe being torn from home or the conditions onboard ship during the crossing but it does allude to the sexual abuse endured by female slaves, the resultant unwanted babies, and mentions an island (perhaps hinting at one of the Caribbean islands used as transitional sites in the preparation of slaves for sale in North America). In addition, Baby Suggs makes reference to the shipping of slaves over the Atlantic when she says "[t]here's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time", so reminding Sethe (and readers) of the huge number of captives who didn't make it as far as American shores (244).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The figure of sixty million is "the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery – those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships". Toni Morrison in an 1987 *Newsweek* interview with Walter Clemons, quoted by Robert Broad, 'Giving Blood to the Scraps: Haints, History, and Hosea in *Beloved*', *African American Review*, 28, 2 (1994), 189-196 (p.193).

<sup>65</sup> William R. Handley, 'The House a Ghost Built: Nommo, Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Contemporary Literature*, 36, 4, (1995), 676-701 (p.689).

<sup>66</sup> Morrison comments, "[m]illions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's

Morrison's main depiction of the Middle Passage is achieved, however, through the character of Beloved, Sethe's daughter resurrected from the dead.<sup>67</sup> When Beloved arrives at 124 she is dehydrated, malnourished and exhausted, a physical state that could be linked to a debilitating ocean crossing (as well as the condition of a new born baby).<sup>68</sup> Later in the text Beloved describes to Denver the mysterious location that she occupied prior to her return, saying "[i]n the dark my name is Beloved ... I'm small in that place" (75). She lies "down on her side and curl[s] up" to demonstrate the position she was in, explaining "[h]ot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in ... A lot of people is down there. Some is dead ... I don't know the names ... I stay there in the dark ... a long time" (75). This fractured discourse evokes both a womb or tomb-like site and the hold of a Middle Passage ship. A dark, crowded, hot space where there is no air, but many dead bodies. Hence Beloved's narrative of "over there", beyond the living world, is used by Morrison to recall the hellish experience of the Atlantic voyage and to remember the nameless millions who suffered it (75).<sup>69</sup>

Beloved's capacity to convey such an ordeal is related to her ambiguous fleshly status. As a figure who has both departed, and returned to the material world she can offer perspectives that other characters cannot. Her body thus acts as a site for the intersection of the past and present, allowing Morrison to evoke earlier traumatic experiences such as that of the Middle Passage *and* have Beloved

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like a whole nation that is under the sea. A nameless, violent extermination". Morrison, 'Interview', with Carabi, p.38.

<sup>67</sup> Morrison explains, "[s]he is a spirit on one hand ... [Sethe's] child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship ... the language of both experiences – death and the Middle Passage – is the same". Morrison, 'In the Realm of Responsibility', p.247.

<sup>68</sup> She has trouble breathing and her neck is not strong enough to support her head. Her skin is also "new ... lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands" and her feet (50). It appears that Beloved has been raised from the dead and reincarnated as a woman the age she would have been if never killed. Yet she experiences the same physical and communicative struggles as a baby: "Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even" (4).

<sup>69</sup> Morrison has discussed this association between the crossing and death: "When Beloved talks to Sethe or Denver, they think she has come back from the grave. And they ask what it was like over there. Her language fits into their conception of life after death. And since it was a dying place, I wanted the association between the physical journey on the slave ships and the grave to be very strong". Morrison, 'Interview', with Carabi, p.39.



operate as an agent in 1873. Indeed, the author has described Beloved as “both a major incumbent of the narrative and sleight of hand”.<sup>70</sup> At the start of the novel she shows “out from [her] ghostly place”, is a purely spectral presence, dislocated into a netherworld by Sethe’s violence (256). Beloved soon, however, assumes corporeal form, wielding influence in 124 by forcing those around her to confront their pasts.<sup>71</sup> She is also able to offer a vivid account of how it actually *felt* to be packed in a hold surrounded by death, to endure the pains and deprivations of the Middle Passage. Her narrative of a location beyond the veil hence encodes a sensory experience akin to that of a slave ship.

Most of Beloved’s recollections are related in a highly fragmented passage set apart from the rest of the text. Her capacity for articulation, it appears, is that of a young child or of one rendered incoherent by trauma, able to enunciate only immediate sense impressions and lacking all conceptual vocabulary. The stunted narrative form and unpunctuated syntax here offer a terrifying and disorienting account of a slave hold:

how can I say things that are pictures ... a hot thing ... it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too ... some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none ... daylight comes through the cracks ... I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in ... we are all trying to leave our bodies behind ... in the beginning we could vomit now we do not now we cannot ... I cannot fall because there is no room to ... the men without skin are making loud noises ... the bread is sea-colored I am too hungry to eat it ... those able to die are in a pile ... the men without skin push them through with poles ... they fall into the sea ... in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men

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<sup>70</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’, p.229. As Valerie Smith points out, “[i]n the body of Beloved ... individual and collective pasts and memories seem to have become united and inseparable”. Valerie Smith, “‘Circling the Subject’: History and Narrative in *Beloved*”, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.342-355 (p.352).

<sup>71</sup> The ghost takes on flesh and is brought back to life in a manner that echoes Ezekiel’s biblical promise of the resurrection of a people from the valley of dry bones. According to Morrison, “[s]he makes them face up to the things they have been avoiding ... Her physical presence is so persistent that she cannot be ignored anymore, so they have to deal with her”. Morrison, ‘Interview’, with Carabi, p.39.

into the women and the women into the men ... the iron circle is around our neck ... I am going to be in pieces ... in the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter ... a hot thing (210-213).

Beloved's voice propels the reader into the horror of her experience, into the midst of an ordeal that conventional language fails. Certain verbal formations, like "the men without skin", referring to white sailors, signal the dislocation of Africans from their known world, snatched into a completely alien reality. And the physical circumstances of a lack of water, over-crowding and the rocking action of storms recall the terrible conditions of the slave ships. Beloved repeats the phrase "a hot thing" perhaps to describe her intense sensation of pain. She also indicates a fear of corporeal dissolution, worrying that she will fall "with the rain", will "break into pieces" (212). In fact her discourse conveys this possibility through its very fragmentation, lack of syntactical wholeness and broken, muddled imagery. As David Lawrence observes, "her 'word-shapes' embody her tenuous physical and psychical shape ... Even the gaps on the printed page suggest the danger of the disintegration of her body".<sup>72</sup> Beloved's verbal incoherence and material instability can be seen as the result, and an evocation, of the world-shattering dislocations that she has undergone. Later she describes "over there" yet again, explaining that "[w]hen she cried there was no one. That dead men lay on top of her ... Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (241). This account appears to detail terrifying suffering and abuse, furthering the narrative's imaginary of trauma.

As if to reinforce the association of Beloved with the Middle Passage, she is repeatedly linked to oceanic imagery. She emerges from water to reach 124 and

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<sup>72</sup> David Lawrence, 'Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*', in *Toni Morrison's Fiction Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David L. Middleton (New York: Garland, 1997), pp.231-245 (pp.239-240). Claudine Raynaud offers an extensive and useful reading of this part of the text: "In between the laconic notations, the textual blanks bear witness to the effort to find words that would translate her visions into language. All the while, for the reader, the text itself represents a thwarted attempt at articulation, the gaps not pauses for breath but 'real' blanks, suffocating loci of barred meaning, silences that spell the insistent closeness of chaos ... The difficulty of reading lies in the complex convergence of the psychoanalytical and the insistence of the referent: the unspeakable experience of the slave trade, the collective trauma, the re-presentation of the black genocide". Claudine Raynaud, 'The Poetics of Abjection', in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates and Carl Pedersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.70-85 (pp.70-1). See also O'Keefe, p.642.

Paul D describes sex with her as a “struggle up” for “the clear air at the top of the sea”, an experience leaving him “beached and gobbling ... thankful ... for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (264). Even at the end of the novel she is seen running towards a stream, “a naked woman with fish for hair” who is later forgotten, just like “the water ... and what it is down there” (267 & 275). The figure of the daughter returned from the dead hence not only is connected to the horrors of the Middle Passage, but also serves as a reminder of the ancestors that lie in an ocean-deep place, “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for” (274). Indeed, Paul D says of Beloved, “[s]he reminds me of something. Something, look like, I’m supposed to remember” (234). Thus, as Susan Bowers points out, Beloved “becomes a bridge between the ‘other side’ and the living” enabling a “passage to knowledge ... that otherwise would be impossible”.<sup>73</sup>

In her 1989 essay ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’ Morrison discusses the narrative of *Beloved*, indicating that the novel’s form is intended to enact a process of displacement. For the text begins with a paragraph, and a first line, that catapults the reader into the story:

[T]he *in medias res* opening that I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant is here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another.<sup>74</sup>

The effects of *Beloved*’s opening are indeed “unsettling”.<sup>75</sup> The phrases “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom”, leave the reader unsure of what exactly 124 is and how or why it is filled with a baby’s venom (3). Hence as well as

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<sup>73</sup> Susan Bowers, ‘Beloved and the New Apocalypse’, in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp.209-230 (p.220). Beloved may be the embodiment of the suffering of the Middle Passage, but ultimately she is not permitted to remain in the material realm. Indeed, she is repelled by communal action to save Sethe, for the neighbourhood women don’t “mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this [is] an invasion” (257). Beloved’s corporeal form breaks up and disperses like a fading memory (see 274-5). Her fleshly manifestation, however, works within the text to enunciate familial separation, physical and psychical disintegration, and traumatic experiences of dislocation.

<sup>74</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’, p.228.

<sup>75</sup> Morrison, ‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’, p.228.

establishing the context of post-emancipation Cincinnati, the novel's first paragraph works to obfuscate meaning. It launches readers into the unfathomable and alien world of Bluestone Road in a form of narrative kidnapping. Whilst the experience of readers can in no way be approximate to that of captured slaves, the author's analogy of snatching does signal the manner in which the text is structured along lines of dislocation.<sup>76</sup>

The device of a precipitate, confusing beginning is also associated with the Middle Passage:

No lobby, no door, no entrance – a *gangplank*, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching – this kidnapping – propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, *as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed*. A few words have to be read before it is clear that 124 refers to a house.<sup>77</sup>

Morrison's description of *Beloved*'s opening, which allows no "preparation" or "defence", indicates her intention to shock readers, to create disorientation.<sup>78</sup>

Her language, however, in addition evokes a ship. Indeed, in particular the sounds of 124 are connected to the sounds of what can only be a slave-carrying vessel. This is suggestive in terms of my reading of a subtext or haunting within the novel, aligning the structure of the house with a black Atlantic ship.

Developing this idea, I will next identify how the spatial encounters and noises of 124 echo those of a Middle Passage voyage.

At the beginning of each section of *Beloved* the narrative describes the current mood or sound emanating from the house, opening with "124 was spiteful" and moving on to term it "loud" and then "quiet" (3, 169 & 239). Whilst it is spiteful readers witness a structure "pitching" and a "shaking ... grinding, shoving floor" (18). This movement recalls that of a ship on stormy seas.<sup>79</sup> Later, during a visit to the cold house, Denver and Beloved are shut in the dark where only a "few

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<sup>76</sup> Jürgen Wolter suggests that *Beloved* "deliberately subjects the reader to a slave-like experience ... of continual displacement ... and disruption of contexts". Jürgen Wolter, "Let the people know where their power is": Deconstruction and Re-Membering in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 45, 3 (1997), 236-246 (p.239).

<sup>77</sup> [my emphasis] Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', pp.228-9.

<sup>78</sup> Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', p.228.

<sup>79</sup> A reference picked up by Jonathan Demme's film interpretation of the text (Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1998).

cuts of sun break through the roof and walls ... like minnows" (122). For Beloved the dim "cracklights above" evoke another place, causing her to curl up and rock back and forth, moaning and seeing faces close to hers (123). I argue that these various spatial experiences allude to a Middle Passage crossing.<sup>80</sup>

When 124 is loud the house's *sounds* are similarly haunting. From the road Stamp Paid hears "a conflagration of hasty voices - loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical ... But ... he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life" (172). Thus, the voices of 124 are incomprehensible from outside, "all speaking at once", as the slaves in the body of the ship may have sounded to those without the hold. Indeed, Stamp Paid identifies "the undecipherable language clamoring around the house" as "the mumbling of the black and angry dead", audible only "in places like 124" (198-9).

In the final section of the novel, after the exorcism of Beloved, 124 falls "stone quiet" (270). It is described as "[c]hastened ... just another weathered house needing repair" (264). There is nothing left of the haunting, a "bleak and minus nothing" which gives Paul D the impression that now "something is missing from 124. Something larger than the people who lived there. Something more than Beloved" (270). Hence, just as at the end of a sea crossing the sounds from the hold would fall quiet, subdued or "[u]nloaded", so 124 is hushed (264). The spatial experiences of, and noises emanating from, the house on Bluestone Road can therefore be read as evoking the Middle Passage, echoing the trauma and clamour of a slave ship, so furthering the depiction achieved through the character of Beloved and working towards a remembering of the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (275).

In *Beloved* Morrison not only reconstructs the Middle Passage, so reminding readers of the theft of enslaved Africans from their homeland, but, I propose, she also incorporates memories and cultural survivals that describe an arc back

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<sup>80</sup> Sethe and Denver's imprisonment also evokes the experience of a slave ship as mother and baby are confined and subjected to filthy, rat-infested conditions. This ordeal remains seared in

across the Atlantic.<sup>81</sup> Sethe recalls not just the story of her mother's voyage, but also the fact that it was told in an African tongue.<sup>82</sup> She remembers Nan as someone "who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now ... The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message – that was and had been there all along" (62). Sethe may have forgotten her mother-tongue, been "picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood", but the message that was passed onto her endures as does her awareness of what she has lost (62). In addition, Sethe's name itself offers a connection back to Africa for, as the only of her mother's children not resultant from coercive sex, she is given her father's African name: "You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never" (62).<sup>83</sup>

Whilst making her escape from Sweet Home Sethe envisaged her restless unborn baby as an antelope. This unusual image provides another link between the slave and her ancestral homeland:

[S]he could not ... stop, for when she did the little antelope rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves. While she was walking, it seemed to graze, quietly ... why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held onto from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? Or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance ... Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope ... [then]

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Denver's memory: "I've seen my mother in a dark place, with scratching noises ... I have been with her where something little watched us from corners. And ... sometimes ... touched" (206).

<sup>81</sup> Barbara Christian too notes, "[i]t seems to me that throughout the book there are echoes of different kinds of African retentions ... this echo in the lives of the slaves of a life that happened previous to their enslavement, that is, a life in Africa. And so one gets that kind of diasporic resonance in relationship to Africa, and also I would say, in relation to the Caribbean". Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell and Nellie Y. McKay, 'A Conversation on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Toni Morrison's Beloved A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.203-220 (p.204).

<sup>82</sup> Sixo too remembers a language from before English and uses it to sing whilst being burnt to death. Indeed, Paul D mourns, "he should have sung along. Loud, something loud and rolling to go with Sixo's tune, but the words put him off – he didn't understand the words. Although it shouldn't have mattered because he understood the sound" (227).

<sup>83</sup> According to Danille Taylor-Guthrie, "[t]he name carries the implications of two traditions, one biblical, Eve's 'gift of life' born after Abel's death, and the other Egyptian, the god of confusion, a trickster". Danille Taylor-Guthrie, 'Who Are the Beloved? Old and New

[t]hey shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did (30-31).

This memory from Sethe's childhood defines the way in which she pictures her baby and helps her to keep on walking towards freedom. It also forms a connection between native Africans imitating the movement of their wildlife in communal dance and the cultural practices of enslaved African Americans who re-enact such movement. At the large plantation where Sethe was born not only was an African tongue spoken, but singing and dancing took place that obviously drew on retentions from across the Atlantic. Participants in these activities were enabled to step outside of slavery, to become something "unchained". The vivid antelope image was not "an invention", but rather a significant survival, an ancestral legacy defiant of the displacement of generations.<sup>84</sup>

As the re-embodiment of Sethe's murdered daughter, the figure of Beloved herself bears relation to African beliefs about the dead returning to trouble their families. As Gurleen Grewal identifies, "Beloved is what the Yoruba would call 'Abiku', a 'wandering child', 'the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother'".<sup>85</sup> Such a cosmology is hinted at in the narrative when Ella says to Stamp Paid "[y]ou know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground" (188). The author herself has stated of Beloved's reincarnation "it was clear to me that it was not at all a violation of African religion and philosophy".<sup>86</sup> According to Barbara Christian, who discusses

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Testaments, Old and New Communities of Faith', *Religion and Literature*, 27, 1 (1995), 119-129 (p.124).

<sup>84</sup> Hélène Christol goes as far as to say "flashes of memory brought back by the ghost allow Sethe and other characters to remember the religions practiced in Africa and carried over to America, as in the Clearing ceremony, stripped of the trappings of Western Christian conventions, or in the pictures of the antelope dance". Hélène Christol, 'The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage', in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Carl Pedersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.164-173 (p.170).

<sup>85</sup> Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), p.106. Such figures also feature in the work of Wole Soyinka (see *Idanre and Other Poems*), Chinua Achebe (see *Things Fall Apart*) and Ben Okri (see *The Famished Road*). Carole Boyce Davies writes, Beloved "is marked by Sethe like the legendary abiku children of Yoruba cosmology or the ogbanje in Igbo culture, who die and are reborn repeatedly to plague their mothers and are marked so that they can be identified when they return". Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London, Routledge 1994), p.139.

<sup>86</sup> Morrison, 'In the Realm of Responsibility', p.249. Elsewhere she refers to "the African conviction regarding reincarnation. It is believed that, in particular, children or young people

Beloved's return as a phenomenon recognisable throughout the black diaspora, "[t]he dead come back, they come back when people die in a way that is not understandable to them, or in a terrible or brutal manner, they come back as babies. They literally return".<sup>87</sup> Hence the mysterious visitor to 124, by her very presence, gestures towards belief systems originating in Africa.

In addition, Beloved's discourse alludes to a place of belonging prior to the Middle Passage. Fused with her fragmented narrative of a slave ship is reference to an ambiguous site occupied by a female figure, possibly an ancestor, with whom the girl identifies: "I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket ... she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way" (210). This woman might perhaps be performing gathering work in an African homeland. "[T]he noisy clouds" that prevent Beloved assisting her could even be the gunpowder smoke resultant from an attack on natives (211).<sup>88</sup> Later further mention is made of "the place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket before the clouds" (211). Despite the difficulty of interpreting this part of the text, I propose that in this description Beloved suggests a location previous to enslavement, hence providing another link back across the Atlantic. Such symbolic reconnections echo the flight of Milkman's ancestor in *Song of Solomon* and also recall Edouard Glissant's notion of "transferred space" within the Americas, the memory of African space that "has become stamped on the spatial reality that we all live".<sup>89</sup>

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who die uneasily return out of the water in forms of members of your family". Morrison, 'Interview', with Carabi, p.39.

<sup>87</sup> Christian, 'A Conversation', pp.204-5.

<sup>88</sup> This is a possibility identified by both Claudine Raynaud (see previous reference) and Elizabeth House, 'Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved', *Studies in American Fiction*, 18 (1990), 17-26.

<sup>89</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p.145. Sethe's term Rememory provides an alternative model for comprehending engagements with the past that might inform a reading of such connections. It implies a return to, or a revisiting of past sites: "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world ... even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there" (36). This is a form of memory that can be shared, that transcends conventional ideas of subjective experience: "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (36). According to Liliane Weissberg, "[m]emory itself is understood as geographical space". Liliane Weissberg, 'Gothic Spaces: The Political Aesthetics of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Modern Gothic A Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage



My reading of *Beloved* can perhaps be enhanced by turning to Paule Marshall's 1983 novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, which introduces another key site to the mapping of a black Atlantic of imaginative recovery. When she embarks on a voyage to reach the small and uncommercialised Caribbean island of Carriacou (having escaped from her cruise ship, the aptly named *Bianca Pride*), Marshall's North American protagonist, Avey Johnson, undergoes a Middle Passage experience. This then initiates her into communal belonging and a legacy of dance and song passed down from Africa. "[E]very inch of space" on the small sailing craft she boards is described as being "packed" full and once the boat starts "reeling and pitching" with the sea, Avey is overcome by a "rising tide of nausea". "Hedg[ed] ... around with ... bodies", she vomits repeatedly and violently until "barely-conscious".<sup>90</sup> She also suffers incontinence and hence is taken into the darkness, "fetid heat and ... airlessness of a hold". Here Avey has a vision of "other bodies lying crowded in with her ... A multitude ... lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans ... Their suffering - the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space - made hers of no consequence".<sup>91</sup> This ordeal thus evokes the conditions and torment of the transatlantic transportation of slaves, reminding Avey of the experiences of her forebears. Afterwards the protagonist is integrated into the local community and joins its annual celebration of ancestral connection, dancing the Carriacou Tramp which recalls the Ring Shouts that she witnessed as a child. This festival affirming a distinctive culture consists of just "a few names of what they called nations ... the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances ... The bare bones" and yet the islanders "cling to [these] with a tenacity" which realises their significance.<sup>92</sup> As Aldon Nielsen concludes, "[t]he ancient forms celebrated here are not the names of origins. They are the names ... transmuted by history, altered by the accents of a newer place and exchanges

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and Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.104-120 (p.115). Hence *Beloved*'s evocation of Africa could be viewed as the revisitation of a world that has been lost, the sharing of a rememory.

<sup>90</sup> Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (London: Virago, 1983), pp.193-205.

<sup>91</sup> Marshall, pp.208-9.

<sup>92</sup> Marshall, p.240.

with other peoples ... Yet, they are forms that carry undertones of origins, tones that tell of ancestral struggle and regeneration".<sup>93</sup>

Avatara Johnson's odyssey describes a trajectory of reconnection with formative childhood memories, the familial and spiritual legacy of her Aunt, and communal recollections of a homeland previous to the displacements of slavery. Integral to this journey is the intermediary site of the Caribbean. Hence *Praisesong for the Widow* depicts a homecoming achieved through a revisitation of the Middle Passage. As Nielson points out, "[t]his ... recovery, however, does not return to a continental home in Africa but seeks its salvific renewal in the syncretic cauldron of the Caribbean ... where Africa and America meet".<sup>94</sup> Here the traumatic sea crossing made by slaves is not reversed but re-membered to facilitate a modern sense of African American belonging. Marshall's project thus parallels Morrison's imaginative reconstruction of the Middle Passage and African survivals in *Beloved*. The voyage, I argue, whilst not exactly a bridge, becomes a means, a route, to rootedness.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* Paul Gilroy proposes a "transcultural, international formation" based upon exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean. This theoretical paradigm thus complements the fictional representations of intercontinental crossings and re-memberings that I have been discussing. Gilroy outlines a new chronotope, or optic, of the ship, writing "I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise ... Ships immediately focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts".<sup>95</sup> This vision of oceanic traversal thus not only recalls the slave carrying vessels evoked by Morrison and Marshall, but also suggests more

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<sup>93</sup> Nielsen, p.143.

<sup>94</sup> Nielsen, p.135.

<sup>95</sup> Gilroy, p.4.

hopeful trajectories, mapping a dynamic space of possibility and connection as well as a history of oppression.<sup>96</sup>

Considering imaginative attempts to revisit the past in recent African American writing (including that of Morrison), Gilroy identifies and welcomes a rejection of simple Africentric disassociation from the west. In fact he condemns reclamations of tradition that hold a “mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the ... horrors of the middle passage”.<sup>97</sup> Rather, “capitalist, racial slavery [and its interfaces] become *internal* to Western modernity and intrinsically modern” in contemporary fictional reconceptualisations.<sup>98</sup> Hence in *Beloved* and *Praisesong*, although remembrances back across the Middle Passage are affirmed, African American characters are presented as products of an irreversible diasporic modernity precipitated by slavery. Indeed, Gilroy argues that such novels accept that “the modern world represents a break with the past, not in the sense that premodern, ‘traditional’ Africanisms don’t survive its institution, but *because the significance and meaning of these survivals gets irrevocably sundered from their origins*”.<sup>99</sup> Thus texts celebrate African retentions, yet because of the rupture of slavery they assume significance as recoveries within a wider and diverse intercontinental legacy.

My reading here has been concerned with both the remembering of traumatic Atlantic crossings and those who lie in an “ocean-deep place”, and the suggestion of reconnections back to Africa, at times via the location of the Caribbean (264). Informed by Gilroy’s theory, this analysis has attempted to comprehend Morrison’s (and Marshall’s) representation of a black Atlantic in

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<sup>96</sup> Therefore for Gilroy, as for Morrison, Marshall and Hayden, ships crossing the Atlantic become pivotal images, operating as “[s]huttles in the rocking loom of history”. Indeed, Gilroy poses the very reading of his text as a “sea voyage” which leads us into an Atlantic arena of interaction and exchange. Gilroy, p.xi. The symbolic image of ships in motion facilitates his idea of the circulation and interdependence of philosophical thinking, musical influence, politics and culture across borders whilst still reminding us of the hegemonic enforced movements that configured the black diaspora.

<sup>97</sup> Gilroy, p.189.

<sup>98</sup> Gilroy, p.220.

<sup>99</sup> [my emphasis] Gilroy, pp.222-3.

terms of severances *and* survivals, to explore *Beloved*'s complex mapping of routes within the modernity engendered by slavery.

### III. “Will the parts hold?”: Dismemberment and Remembering

This chapter concludes with an examination of how the tropes of dismemberment and re-membering might operate formally as well as in terms of *Beloved*'s themes. Multiple focalizers, complementary or jarring perspectives, textual fragmentation and circling or indirect narrative progression are just some of the mechanisms at work in the novel.<sup>100</sup> More specifically its dislocatory structure, I suggest, is inextricably bound up with the figuration of bodily damage.<sup>101</sup> Having already touched on the intersecting points of view of Sethe and Paul D, the novel's abrupt opening and the shock of the white men's account of Sethe's infanticide, I will here consider the complex relation between narrative and the somatic. In Morrison's fiction bodies are frequently inscribed with a history of injury and deprivation. Indeed, in *Beloved* slavery's impact is written on (and therefore read from) the physical form. This leads to an engagement with the body as text, but also the negotiation of issues of pain and articulation. In addition, characters' recollections and voicings (the components of the novel's construction) are often prompted by sensory stimulation, a feature suggesting that memories are linked to, or even stored in, the flesh. Whilst several critics have explored *Beloved*'s representation of the body and / or narrative form, such topics warrant further investigation in terms of slavery's disruption and trauma.<sup>102</sup>

Morrison's depiction of slavery charts multiple physical abuses. The violence directed towards black bodies by whites is referred to throughout her novel, almost every character bearing a scar or recalling brutality. The corporeal evidence left behind by persecution provides some of the most powerful imagery of the text. For example, describing her departure from Sweet Home Sethe says,

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<sup>100</sup> According to Brian Finney in *Beloved* “the distance between what the Russian Formalists called the fabula (the chronological ordering of events) and the syuzhet (the order in which events are actually presented in the narrative) ... is about as great as can be tolerated by most modern readers”. Quoted by Schopp, p.217.

<sup>101</sup> As Jürgen Wolter observes of Morrison's characters, “the structure of their (hi)stories epitomises the African-American experience of displacement, *mutilation*, and disruption” [my emphasis]. Wolter, p.243.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, the aforementioned essay by Valerie Smith and Cynthia Dobbs, ‘Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited’, *African American Review*, 32, 4 (1998), 563-578.

“[p]assed right by those boys hanging in the trees. One had Paul A’s shirt on but not his feet or his head” (198). This observation chillingly evokes a vision of mutilation, bodies disfigured beyond recognition. *Beloved* also details many of the mechanisms of restraint, impediment and torture employed by slave owners. Description of these devices enables Morrison to convey the cruelty of the punishments inflicted on slaves and provides a means of communicating suffering to the reader. For example, for attempting to escape Paul D was forced to wear a collar, what he alludes to as “neck jewelry – its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air” (273). This menacing instrument inhibited his movements, so debilitating any resistance, and also caused humiliation, reminding him of the similarities between his own position and that of Sweet Home’s animal stock.<sup>103</sup>

It is another tool of slavery, however, that illustrates best the effects of physical abuse as depicted by Morrison. For the “bit” that Paul D was made to wear denied him the capacity for speech as well as causing agony. It worked to silence him, so enacting (pre-empting?) the very incommunicability of pain, the way in which pain destroys language. This is an issue which I will later show to be key to *Beloved*’s form. The narrative describes “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it” (71). And this evocation of experience accords with Morrison’s disclosure that she wanted “to imagine the bit as an active instrument, rather than simply as a curio or an historical fact”. She explains, “I spent a long time trying to find out what it looked like ... Then I realized ... that the reader didn’t need to *see* it so much as *feel* what it was like”. Just as the author wishes to convey the torment of the bit, so she wants the narrative of *Beloved* to give readers access to how slavery might have been experienced by those who endured it.<sup>104</sup> The body thus becomes the touchstone of a larger struggle to speak a history of suffering.

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<sup>103</sup> Trudier Harris identifies the way in which the enslaved body was turned into a site for the enactment of power: “At the least sign of uppityness, slaveholders could further ‘break’ slaves with a series of barbaric punishments, including whipping, branding a letter on the face or back, cropping an ear or a finger, confining them in bits, or selling them ‘down the river’”. Harris, p.330.

<sup>104</sup> “I wanted to show the reader what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked ... The kind of information you can find between the lines of history”. Toni Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, *The Paris Review*, 35, 128 (1993), 82-125 (pp.104-5).

Not only does the bit “put a wildness where before there wasn’t any”, it also leaves a mark, distorting the human face and therefore its expressions (71). Sethe remembers of her mother “[s]he’d had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (203). This grotesque inscription, a grinning mask, demonstrates the corporeal (and hence also psychological) damage done to slaves. Here scars remain after the fact of violence, operating as physical signs of abuse (and of the debilitation of, in this case, non-verbal forms of communication). Such injuries haunt the novel’s characters and their narratives. For example, Ella “remember[s] the bottom teeth she ... lost to the brake” whilst “the scars from the bell [are] thick as rope around her waist” (258). Although no description of the brake or the bell is provided, Ella’s marked body suggests the horrific suffering inflicted by these devices. It becomes a text that bears witness.<sup>105</sup>

The treatment of enslaved bodies not only scarred and deformed them, but also led to physical denial and self-loathing. The disregard and contempt exhibited towards black flesh caused a kind of negation that is observed by Baby Suggs: “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down” (209). Here Morrison explores the misguided theory that slaves did not form the close relationships, nor possess the sensibilities of fully developed humans. That their animalistic nature rendered them incapable of true feeling.<sup>106</sup> Instead of the capacity to love, both black men and women were assigned rapacious and exoticised sexual appetites by white-authored stereotypes and fetishes. In order to rationalise the use of them for breeding purposes, their

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<sup>105</sup> As Dobbs observes, “[b]ecause scarred bodies are literally marked with the violent history of their past, this past cannot be forgotten. Scars thus function as signs of a narrative of pain”. Dobbs, p.575.

<sup>106</sup> Baby Suggs’ own experience illustrates the contempt demonstrated towards kinship bonds between slaves: “men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby’s eight children had six fathers” (23).

bodies were characterised as insensitive and / or depraved.<sup>107</sup> Such myths caused slaves to feel shame about their physicality, their association with the base. Indeed, Sethe found whites could “[d]irty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (251). Baby Suggs, however, does offer some hope of a more positive relation to corporeality in her instruction of Denver: “She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it” (209). The grandmother thus affirms black flesh, countering its degradation and encouraging its gratification.

Sexual coercion, forced labour and regimes of violence all contributed to the physical oppression of slaves. Black bodies, damaged and disfigured as a means to subjugate, were despised by both whites and those blacks who internalised the characteristics projected onto them. Baby Suggs enunciates this process of ‘denigration’ to her congregation in the Clearing:

Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty ... And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead ... they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight ... And all your inside parts ... they’d just as soon slop for hogs (88).

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<sup>107</sup> In addition they were invested with notions of monstrous physicality: “White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood” (198). This evocation of threatening bestiality and wildness performs a process of othering. It opposes “dark skin” (covering a seething and dangerous jungle) and “white blood” (the object of desire, pure but vulnerable). Yet in Morrison’s narrative animality, aggression and cannibalism are exposed as the oppressor’s own projections: “The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own” (199). The text so inverts discourses of black primitivism to posit the tangled jungle and the bloodlust as products of slavery. As Alan Rice points out, “[h]ere Morrison uses two tropes familiar in discussions of race, the bestial, and the cannibal, exemplifying the racist myths of black beasts and cannibals as the starting point in her own agenda to expose these stereotypes as the reflection not of biological reality but as a construction of white, Eurocentric cultural hegemony. Alan Rice, “‘Who’s eating whom’: The Discourse of Cannibalism in the Literature of the Black Atlantic from Equiano’s *Travels* to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, *Research in African Literatures*, 29, 4 (1998), 106-121 (p.118). Similar ideas are developed by Morrison in her critical work where she examines the figuration of blackness in white American fiction: “What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire”. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p.38.



This sermon presents a litany of harm done to the black body which includes lynching, restraint and deprivation. It charts the dismemberment of slave anatomies and catalogues the abuse of individual limbs and organs as if to illustrate the denial of selfhood and wholeness involved. The implied fragmentation recalls Sethe's condition on escaping slavery, "[n]othing of [hers] was intact ...except the cloth that covered her hair", and the black body is pictured as being in pieces, butchered even (34). Not only is it lacerated, severed and denied, it is also rendered mute for its mouth is "broken". The above passage hence explores disintegration and violation (as well as introducing the trope of silencing). Such themes, as I will demonstrate, shape Morrison's very narrative project.

When Sethe remembers being whipped for informing Mrs. Garner about the theft of her milk the author's concerns with injury, marking and articulation come to the fore. Sethe tells Paul D "[f]elt like I was split in two ... [t]hey dug a hole for my stomach so as not to hurt the baby" (202). Beaten despite her pregnancy, the black woman's back was flayed whilst her belly (containing potential property) was shielded. This treatment illustrates the complexities of the gendering of the female slave. Sethe was physically punished as a male slave would have been, severely wounded without consideration of conventional notions of (white) female weakness, yet, at the same time, her reproductive capacity was valued as a means of increasing the master's wealth. When Sethe says that she felt "split in two" her contradictory position is figured using the body, in particular her back and womb.<sup>108</sup>

The brutal reprimand administered to Sethe, in addition, highlights problems of communication. For the pain caused her to consume, and so silence herself: "[b]it a piece of my tongue off when they opened my back. It was hanging by a

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<sup>108</sup> Barbara Omolade describes such division, writing of the female slave "[t]o [the master] she was a fragmented commodity ... her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family ... Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment". Barbara Omolade, 'Hearts of Darkness', in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp.350-367 (p.354). See also Keenan, 'Four Hundred Years of Silence', p.66.

shred ... Clamped down on it, it come right off. I thought, Good God, I'm going to eat myself up" (202). Sethe's tongue, her means of enunciating experience, was damaged. Simultaneously, however, the whipping made her flesh speak as schoolteacher enacted power over her through his violence. Thus the woman's voice was debilitated whilst her wounded body became a cipher of subjection.<sup>109</sup>

Reference to the theorisations of Elaine Scarry might prove illuminating here. In *The Body in Pain* Scarry explores the unshareability of bodily suffering: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned".<sup>110</sup> Morrison figures this loss of language symbolically by having Sethe bite her tongue, by having the master's inscription of her body silence all attempts at self-articulation. Yet Scarry also analyses human efforts to communicate pain and identifies two metaphors that recur in the struggle to share such experience. The first "specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain" and the second "specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain".<sup>111</sup> In *Beloved* Morrison makes reference to instruments such as the collar and the bit as she tries to convey how slavery might have felt. And, more frequently, physical injuries and scars are interpreted as signs as characters attempt to comprehend each other's pain. This trope is significant in terms of the ambitions of the narrative as a whole.<sup>112</sup>

The disfiguration of Sethe's torso in particular is read by a series of characters. Morrison herself comments, "Sethe is not able to see the tree on her back ... but

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<sup>109</sup> As Carl Plasa observes, "[w]hite power ... engages constantly in the project of rendering itself visible, quite literally disporting itself ... upon the enslaved black body by means of physical violence". Plasa, p.86.

<sup>110</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.4.

<sup>111</sup> Scarry, p.15. "Physical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage, but these things are referential; consequently we often call on them to convey the experience of the pain itself". Scarry, p.15.

<sup>112</sup> Kristin Boudreau also refers to Scarry in her reading of *Beloved*. Boudreau, however, finds pain's unspeakability insurmountable: "Pain communicates nothing if not its own incommunicability". Indeed, she proposes that pain unmakes the selfhood of Morrison's characters. Kristin Boudreau, 'Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Contemporary Literature*, 36, 3 (1995), 447-465 (p.455).

she is marked by the history of slavery, written with scars”.<sup>113</sup> The white girl who assists her escape interprets the lacerated flesh thus:

A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk – it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom (79).

This description is both beautiful and horrifying. It conveys graphically the terrible carving of Sethe’s flesh into ridges or branches, but also perhaps aestheticises the injury, risking an elision or diminishment of Sethe’s suffering.<sup>114</sup> Amy’s organic imagery does, however, give the fugitive a metaphor with which to comprehend her wounds. This can be seen as, I suggest, not an imposition but rather an attempt to reach or express another’s hurt through language. Her articulation might even be considered as an artwork trying to bring pain into a realm of shared discourse.<sup>115</sup>

When Sethe loses the ability to voice her experience, her body instead takes on a signifiatory role as others attempt to understand her ordeal through reference to visible corporeal damage. This accords with Scarry’s identification of “the benign potential of the language of agency, its invocation by those who wish to express their own pain ... or to imagine other people’s pain”. The metaphors of the weapon and the wound, however, can also be used in “the conflation of pain with power”: “In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person’s body to be translated into another person’s voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power”.<sup>116</sup> Thus, in the lexicon of *Sweet Home*, Sethe’s injury speaks of schoolteacher’s authority. Yet I propose that by depicting other interpretations of bodily marking, *Beloved* presents a complex engagement with issues of suffering and communication, allowing for the possibility of an empathetic imaginary.

When Paul D first arrives at 124 he too reads Sethe’s body:

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<sup>113</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Interview’, with Carabi, p.89.

<sup>114</sup> See Dobbs, p.574.

<sup>115</sup> See Scarry, p.9.

<sup>116</sup> Scarry, pp.17-18.

He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches ... And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display ... he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years (17-8).

Paul D's tenderness and intimacy awaken Sethe to the possibility of trust and understanding. Yet his attempt to learn her sorrow is presented ambivalently for, despite his kisses, her back remains numb. Paul D's metaphor for Sethe's scarring is similarly dead as he describes it as "sculpture", tormented iron, not living flesh. When he *touches* Sethe's body the narrative language recalls Amy's tree imagery (roots, branches, leaves etc.). However, when Paul D looks at the wound he *sees* decorative metalwork. This is a somewhat cold vision of horrific beauty that focuses on the authorship of an ironsmith, perhaps schoolteacher. It also suggests unshareability: "too passionate for display". Paul D hence is not yet able to comprehend Sethe's pain and his attempt to do so falters. His subsequent description of her back only reinforces this failure: "the wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a gold miner pawing through pay dirt was in fact a revolting clump of scars" (21). Here Paul D's previous gesture is disparaged, associated with the base, and Sethe's body is viewed as repulsive, ugly, marred.

Morrison's novel, I argue, enacts formally the difficulties of both expressing and apprehending suffering. Thus the issues of fragmentation, silencing, and aestheticisation raised by treatment of bodily damage within the text have a wider significance for the narrative itself. *Beloved's* figuration of memory processes in particular contributes to this engagement. Characters' recollections (conveyed through use of focalization) and acts of storytelling often structure the text. Yet as ex-slaves such as Sethe and Paul D attempt to avoid the pain of confronting their pasts, a withholding of information, a frustration of the reader's desire to accumulate knowledge of the plot, takes place. Narrative progression is thus indirect and gradual. Traumatic memories, in addition, are frequently linked to bodily sensation, indeed appear to be carried in the flesh. Sethe, for example, is haunted by the experience of exchanging sex with a white man in order to have

her dead child's headstone engraved: she cannot forget "[t]he welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones ... Those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (4-5). This vivid recollection illustrates why attempts to evade the painful past lead to a blunting or deadening of the senses (see 38-9). For eighteen years Sethe "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6). And the efforts of her and others to "beat ... back the past" shape the disrupted, halting and broken form of *Beloved* itself (73).<sup>117</sup>

Despite such exertions the horrors of slavery *are* remembered, invading characters' minds and therefore narratives with some force. For example, near the start of the novel the terrible beauty of Sweet Home comes flooding back to Sethe as she washes chamomile from her feet. Here sensory stimulation prompts recollection (see 6).<sup>118</sup> As Laura Doyle identifies, "[a]gain and again in the novel physical phenomena, while surfacing memories for the characters, by the same token make space for the recovery of history in the narrative ... the past materializes both for the character and for the reader through ... some touch or sight or sound".<sup>119</sup> One of the most striking instances of this form of recovery occurs when Sethe braids Denver and Beloved's hair:

Sethe gathered hair from the comb and leaning back tossed it into the fire. It exploded into stars and the smell infuriated them. 'Oh, my Jesus,' she said and stood up so suddenly the comb she had parked in Denver's hair fell to the floor ... she had to do something with her hands because she was remembering

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<sup>117</sup> As Mobley points out, "[w]hile all texts develop to a certain extent by secrecy or by what information they withhold and gradually release to the reader, the text of *Beloved* moves through a series of narrative starts and stops that are complicated by Sethe's desire to forget or 'disremember'". Marilyn Sanders Mobley, 'A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Modern Critical Views Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), pp.189-199 (p.194). See also Karen Carmean, *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* (New York: Whitson Publishing, 1993), p.87.

<sup>118</sup> "Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed towards water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags ... something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them ... and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty" (6).

<sup>119</sup> Doyle, pp.218-9. Rebecca Ferguson associates this with the "Proustian catalyst". Rebecca Ferguson, 'History, Memory and Language in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora (London: Longman, 1998), pp.154-174 (p.158).

something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind (61).

Here the powerful and acrid smell of burnt hair jogs Sethe's long repressed memory of her mother's death and the disfigured corpses of those killed with her. Although Sethe is already thinking about the difficulties of sustaining family relations in slavery, it is the pungent smell of burning hair that prompts her to remember an incident so terrible that she thinks of it as "privately shameful". To recall as a child attempting to identify her mother but being "yanked ... away from the pile before she could make out the mark" (62). This involuntary and deeply disturbing memory thus presents another image of the mutilation of black flesh as well as revealing the pain and trauma of encountering slave pasts. It also suggests a failed attempt to read the maternal body, so again raising issues of the body as text, and demonstrates how rupture operates formally within the novel.

The figure of Beloved in many ways symbolises Morrison's ideas about the impact of suffering on the body and the ability to voice experience. As I discussed earlier, she recalls the ordeal of the Middle Passage, her tenuously cohesive corporeal form and her distorted narrative enacting the effects of this dislocation. Beloved is also associated with fragmentation, however, when her desire for completion through unity with Sethe is frustrated by Paul D's presence. Here she foresees physical disintegration:

Beloved ... pulled out a back tooth ... and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once ... on one of these mornings ... she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to hips when she is by herself ... she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces ... When her tooth came out – an odd fragment, last in the row – she thought it was starting (133).

This threat of dissolution echoes Beloved's original decapitation and recalls the dismemberment referred to in Baby Suggs' sermon cataloguing abuses of black flesh. The vision of somatic disruption obviously relates also to psychical and emotional damage. Indeed, according to Bowers, Beloved "[a]mong other things ... is the embodiment of ... the psychological effects of slavery".<sup>120</sup> Although she attempts to fortify her body, to shore it together by vampirically feeding off

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<sup>120</sup> Bowers, p.219.

of her mother, at the end of the narrative *Beloved* is said to “erupt into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her away” (275). She ultimately fragments, enacting the destruction engendered by degradation and violent oppression. This ‘eruption’ again recalls her fractured discourse whilst giving voice to the terrors of the Middle Passage (see 210-213). This evocation of trauma paradoxically articulates that which is beyond conventional communication, that which is unspeakable. Indeed, it is only through such broken prose, I argue, that such experiences can be conveyed.<sup>121</sup> Enacting fragmentation, *Beloved* explores how language might be used to enunciate suffering that destroys language. This has resonance with Scarry’s description of the emergence from pain into speech, an idea to which I will return.

Despite the novel’s focus on the damage done to black bodies, its depiction of mutilation and dismemberment, debasement and othering, it also offers a paradigm of recovery. For as well as chronicling injuries Baby Suggs additionally preaches an affirmative message of healing. Indeed, she urges ex-slaves to cherish and celebrate their own flesh:

Here ... we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass ... Love your hands! ... Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* ... This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you ... love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up ... The dark, dark liver – love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize (88-9).

In spite of her own disability, Baby Suggs finds resources to counter the persistent white abuse of black bodies. Her elevation of flesh emphasises the importance of reversing the harm wrought by persecution and teaches the black population of Cincinnati to reject the hatred and disregard shown towards their

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<sup>121</sup> *Beloved*’s narrative lacks proper syntax and punctuation, its meaning is difficult to follow and

physical beings. The itemisation of parts and organs that figured a denial of integrity is hence turned into a catalogue of celebration. Baby Suggs' sermon in the Clearing promotes touch and sensuality, stroking and kissing, raising up the black body as beautiful, generative and pleasurable despite centuries of degradation. Indeed, it asserts that the "prize", the reward of life itself, is the "beat and beating heart".<sup>122</sup> Calling children, men and women to her to laugh, cry, dance and sing, Baby Suggs' unorthodox preaching allows ex-slaves to repossess their bodies. She does not denounce their lives as sinful, nor promise rewards in heaven, instead helping them to find a grace of their own imagining.<sup>123</sup>

After her death Baby Suggs' positive influence continues. Instructed by her grandmother to "always listen to [her] body and love it", Denver's prospects at the end of the novel sound a note of hope (209). She relishes physical pleasure and sensuality and eventually finds a life of her own outside of 124.<sup>124</sup> Although scared to leave her home, Denver is assisted to make contact with the wider community by Baby Suggs' voice speaking to her from beyond the grave (see

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she struggles for verbal formations, asking "how can I say things that are pictures" (210).

<sup>122</sup> The pre-eminence of this organ is explained by the episode of Baby's emancipation:

"suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing?" (141). The thumping of her freed heart brought her to an awareness that she was alive and that she owned herself. And with "nothing left to make a living with but her heart" she offered it up in a celebration of love and sensuality to others, advocating an appreciative recovery of black flesh (87). As Thompson points out "every aspect of the flesh is privileged, as if to undo white western culture's denial of the body along with its conception of a separable, abstract soul that supersedes the body. Baby's sermon on loving your own flesh is the sacred discourse".

Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Speaking the Unspeakable: The Representation of Disability as Stigma in Toni Morrison's Novels', in *Courage and Tools: The Florence Howe Award for Feminist Scholarship 1974-1989*, ed. by Joanne Glasgow and Angela Ingram (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), pp.238-251 (p.247).

<sup>123</sup> "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them that they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" (88). As Wolter notes, "Baby Suggs' sanctification of the black body deconstructs the normative discourse of the slaveowner whose whip's inscription disfigures this body; her religion denies his power over the black body and reinstates black ownership". Wolter, p.241.

<sup>124</sup> Denver thrills to her body and it is hinted stimulates herself through masturbation. As a child she found a boxwood tree house within which she could indulge in secrets "[a]ccompanied ... by wild veronica until she discovered cologne" (28). "It began as a little girl's houseplay, but as her desires changed, so did the play ... In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food ... Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear" (28-9). Sheltered by "fifty inches of murmuring leaves"



244). Indeed, thanks to her grandmother she has an affirmative sense of self and begins to learn of the rewards to be gained through relationships with others.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps Baby Suggs' most significant act, however, was her nursing of Sethe who arrived at 124 "all mashed up and split open" (135). Here her beliefs about respecting and caring for black flesh were enacted in her treatment of Sethe's wounds:

[Baby] led [her] to the keeping room and ... bathed her in sections, starting with her face ... Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen ... When Sethe's legs were done, Baby looked at her feet and wiped them lightly. She cleaned between Sethe's legs with two separate pans of hot water and then tied her stomach and vagina with sheets ... She helped Sethe to a rocker and lowered her feet into a bucket of salt water and juniper ... The crust from her nipples Baby softened with lard and then washed away (93).

Baby Suggs lovingly cleaned and bound Sethe's lacerated and leaking body. The passage detailing her ministrations reveals the fugitive's form as rent apart by whipping, running and birthing.<sup>126</sup> Yet Baby approached her daughter in law's injuries in careful stages, tackling one body part and then another. Using pan after pan of water heated on the stove, she struggled to make an "unrecognizable" anatomy once more recognisable (93). Pausing often, Baby Suggs reassembled Sethe's ruptured physical frame, putting back together what Sweet Home had broken down. This process recalls her account of the damage done to individual limbs in the Clearing. Here, however, black flesh is bathed, stroked and supported in an intimate ritual of healing.<sup>127</sup>

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Denver withdrew into a felicitous space and perhaps found, through her fantasies and sensuality, the grace of which Baby Suggs spoke (28).

<sup>125</sup> The final description of her comes from Paul D who sees "a young man ... running towards her, saying, 'Hey, Miss Denver. Wait up' she turned to him, her face looking like someone had turned up the gas jet" (267). This significant note of promise, enabled by Baby's words, offers an affirmative vision of joy found in relationships between black people and perhaps the pleasure taken in black flesh.

<sup>126</sup> Bleeding and festering, flayed, ruptured, swollen, sweating and dripping milk, Sethe epitomized the female body as uncontained, a leaky vessel tied to maternal biological functions and grotesque abjection (See 30-33). Morrison's depiction is firmly grounded, however, in the corporeal damage done to slaves by white male violence. And associations with monstrous physicality are transformed as readers come to see her horrific state as testament to an affirmative maternal commitment.

<sup>127</sup> Later Sethe will recall "the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her

Baby Suggs' work to re-member the black female body, in addition, gives rise to another reading of Sethe's back: "As she turned to go, Baby Suggs caught a glimpse of something dark on the bed sheet ... Roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders. Baby hid her mouth with her hand ... wordlessly the older woman greased the flowering back" (93). Baby Suggs' reaction once more, I suggest, recalls Scarry's discussion of the nature of pain. Yet this time it is not Sethe, but her companion who is silenced by the injuries inflicted by slavery. The focus of the narrative is on Baby Suggs' wordlessness rather than Sethe's inability to voice her hurt. Indeed, the grandmother covers her mouth in an expression of horror and her incapacity to speak. Rendered mute, Baby interprets the whipped woman's back as blooming roses of blood. This organic image, like Amy's tree, suggests a kind of terrible beauty, but also signals perhaps the proliferation or "flowering" of meanings and explications around the marked body? Baby Suggs, in her silent treatment of Sethe's wound, seems to apprehend her patient's suffering and to begin a process of reclaiming black flesh from the inscription of the master.<sup>128</sup>

Such repossession is also enacted by Sethe's mother:

One thing she did do ... she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast ... on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said 'This is your ma'am. This'; and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark' (61).

Although Sethe's mother was kept away by fieldwork, she did manage to engage with her daughter in one single act of maternal affirmation. She used a symbol branded onto her body as a badge of identification, a sign to allow recognition. Despite the fact that the wound was probably inflicted by a slave dealer or master

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clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage [her] nape when ... her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not" (98).

<sup>128</sup> Marcus Wood suggestively writes of Sethe's back "[t]he healing and the trauma lie in the feeling the site produces in others. The site, which is also the memorial of the suffering, has a power which must be allowed to speak out of its terrible muteness. The art of the torturer has created something beyond his ... control". Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.267.

to indicate ownership, she reclaimed the marking of her flesh, giving it new meaning to create a familial bond, to enable Sethe to know her. This illustrates the significance of scars in Morrison's text. Problems of interpretation are also intimated, however, as Sethe says "I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own" (61). And, as discussed previously, the daughter does later fail to identify her mother's corpse, so disfigured is it by violence.

The tropes of dismemberment and re-membering, pain and silencing, that I have traced thus far bear significant relation to Morrison's narrative form. Indeed, not only does the text represent physical violation and the corresponding dissolution experienced by slaves, but it also enacts fragmentation in its construction. Just as suffering inhibits communication, affecting the human capacity for articulation, so formally *Beloved* is ruptured, distorted and broken, making readerly progress indirect, halting and difficult. Not only, however, does the novel play out what Scarry terms the unmaking of language, but it also works as an expression of the very power of language, the birth or making of language.<sup>129</sup> For in its convolutions and gaps the narrative finds a way to speak the unspeakable. Such composition can, in addition, be associated with the incremental reconstruction of the slave body performed by Baby Suggs. *Beloved* as a whole traces patterns of disrupted recollection, often prompted by sensory stimulation. This movement functions as a reassembly of parts, an affirmative suturing of that which has been rent. Although, as already discussed, textual disintegration enacts the dislocatory effects of slavery, counter impulses also operate as characters recall their pasts and share their stories, so creating a narrative thread, albeit a circuitous one.<sup>130</sup> More important than complete understanding, this structure suggests, is the struggle, the process of attempting to articulate and apprehend traumatic experience. The telling of Sethe's tale, in particular, offers a paradigm for the novel's distinctive form. Indeed, her reply to

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<sup>129</sup> "To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself". Scarry, p.6.

<sup>130</sup> As Henderson observes, "[i]f dismemberment deconstitutes and fragments the whole, then rememory functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize the various discrete and heterogeneous parts into a meaningful sequential whole through the process of narrativisation". Henderson, p.89.

Paul D's question about the infanticide serves not only to answer him, but also to illustrate how Morrison's fiction itself works.<sup>131</sup>

Sethe's oblique approach to Paul D's enquiry, foregrounding her experience of motherhood at Sweet Home, confuses him. He cannot follow her meaning and is distracted by the way in which she tells her story:

She was spinning. Round and round the room ... Paul D sat at the table watching her drift into view then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel ... Once in a while she rubbed her hips as she turned, but the wheel never stopped ... It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction, which might have helped his head. Then he thought, No, it's the sound of her voice; it's too near ... listening to her was like having a child whisper into your ear so close you could feel its lips form the words you couldn't make out because they were too close. He caught only pieces of what she said – which was fine, because she hadn't gotten to the main part – the answer to [his] question (159-161).

Sethe's indirect and spinning narrative, which refuses to provide her audience with the straightforward reply he wants, echoes her bodily movements around the kitchen. She has been encouraged to try to communicate what happened by "the ever-ready love" in Paul D's eyes, "[o]therwise she would have said what the newspaper said she said and no more" (161). Yet the form of her discourse, her physical agitation and circling trajectory overwhelm and sidetrack Paul D. As Sethe describes nursing her babies and her isolation as a female slave, the black man can comprehend only fragments of what she relates and believes that she is "gnawing at something else instead of getting to the point" (162). He fails to grasp that her infanticide was entirely bound up with the circumscribed maternal experiences to which she refers. Sethe's words are "too close" for Paul D to make out, too terrible for him to hear. Listening to the black woman's tale, he cannot process the information she offers, his difficulty mirroring that of

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<sup>131</sup> Just as the murder scene is the secret at the centre of the novel, reached only gradually and indirectly by the reader, so it also remains obscured from Paul D. As Matus identifies, "it is the point towards which the narrative continually moves and draws back – the unspeakable heart of the story, the central incident that gradually impresses its shape on the reader through the accumulation of surrounding details and incidents long before the narration of schoolteacher's attempt to recapture Sethe and her children". Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.107.

Morrison's readers who struggle to absorb the material of a wheeling text which presents a sometimes uncomfortably intimate account of the horrors of slavery. As Sethe circles, so the narrative of *Beloved* turns, causing different facets of its whole to drift into and out of view. Indeed, Krumholz suggestively observes, "Sethe's spinning motion around the room, around her subject, describes the necessity for approaching the unutterably painful history of slavery through oblique, fragmented, and personal glimpses of the past – that is, through means most often associated with fiction".<sup>132</sup> This offers a useful perspective for interpreting Morrison's project of revisiting the experiences of slavery, of attempting to convey what it may have felt like, of speaking the unspeakable.

Sethe apprehends her act of storytelling as a failure:

[She] knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask ... Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple (163).

For her the measures that she took to protect her children from schoolteacher were straightforward: "I ... put my babies where they'd be safe" (164). Paul D (and perhaps the reader?), however, is overcome by "[t]he roaring in [his] head" that her explanation causes (164). Whilst Sethe's circling tale creates a gulf between her and Paul D, a rift healed only at the end of the novel, her narrative should not be read negatively. Indeed, Sethe's attempt to articulate her experience provides a useful model, suggesting how Morrison's confusing and wheeling text might be approached. The struggle to communicate, the process of finding the "word-shapes" to relate such trauma, is the point here (99). If, instead of expecting a clear and direct response to our need as readers to unravel the plot, we come to see *Beloved*'s shifts and fragments, associations, turns and gaps as enacting a concern with how to give voice to slavery, then a better understanding of Morrison's project is reached. Indeed, such disrupted means perhaps offer the best way to explore up close a painful past, forcing readers to work at comprehension, to participate in a structural re-membering.

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<sup>132</sup> Linda Krumholz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in *Toni Morrison's Beloved A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (New

When Paul D finds Sethe weak and “expressionless” on his return to 124 at the end of the novel all of the issues that I have been discussing are drawn together (271). He offers to “[r]ub [Sethe’s] feet” as Amy once did and recalls Baby Suggs’ healing of her body, saying “[l]et me heat up some water” (272). These gestures echo previous corporeal repair work, suggesting that Paul D has learned the importance of affirming and caring for black flesh. The narrative then presents Sethe’s point of view: “There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (272). Although her thoughts indicate self-negation, even bodilessness, Sethe’s discourse resonates with reminders of the reassembly that Baby Suggs once performed. The possibility that Paul D might minister to her damaged form in sections, re-membering it bit by bit, makes reference to her experience of both fragmentation and reconstruction, two processes key to the text as well as Sethe’s physicality. At *Beloved*’s resolution coherency and integrity cannot be guaranteed, yet there is hope that the parts will hold and that Paul D and Sethe will be reconciled.

To conclude I will examine one final passage that illustrates how closely Morrison relates narrative form to the body. When Sethe and Paul D are reunited for the first time since leaving Sweet Home, moved by memories of a shared history they rather unsuccessfully attempt to make love. After this disappointing coupling, “resentful of one another and the skylight above them”, they lie side by side, “sorry and too shy to make talk” (20). Out of this silent, estranged and sad scene Morrison, however, creates a narrative duet of touch, recollection and, eventually, sensual unity between the black man and woman.<sup>133</sup>

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York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.107-125 (p.122).

<sup>133</sup> The author comments, “[w]hen Sethe and Paul D first see each other, in about half a page they get the sex out of the way, which isn’t any good anyway – it’s fast, and they’re embarrassed about it – and then they’re lying there trying to pretend they’re not in that bed, that they haven’t met, and then they begin to think different thoughts, which begin to merge so you can’t tell who’s thinking what. That merging to me is more tactically sensual than if I had tried to describe body parts”. Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, p.109.

The construction of the passage turns on the interaction of Sethe and Paul D's bodies. So although it begins with Paul D acrimoniously contemplating "the spread-away, flat roundness" of Sethe's breasts, when he moves in bed the text switches to Sethe's perspective (21). Indeed, at each physical gesture there is a shift in focalization: "Paul D ... folded his hands behind his head. An elbow grazed Sethe's shoulder. The touch of cloth on her skin startled her" (22). Contact with the body lying next to her brings Sethe's thoughts to the fore in the narrative (she dismisses Paul D as just another man: "they studied your scars and tribulations, after which they did what he had done: ran her children out and tore up the house") (22). When she next stirs, crossing her ankles, the text moves back from Sethe's to Paul D's point of view.<sup>134</sup> Hence Morrison crafts a subtle, yet powerful narrative structure of alternation and reciprocation without a single word of reported dialogue.

As the scene develops both characters recall memories of Sweet Home and their resentful feelings towards each other gradually alter. Prompted to consider his own foolishness for imagining sex with Sethe "off and on for twenty-five years", Paul D smiles and "turn[s] over on his side, facing her" (25). Examining her visage he finds it attractive once more, thus revising his earlier analysis. Meanwhile Sethe, alerted by his movement, feels his gaze on her and remembers her marriage to Halle. She too smiles, thinking of her first love making in the Garners' cornfield: "Even the crows knew and came to look. Uncrossing her ankles, she managed not to laugh aloud" (26). Paul D's reinstated perspective, dwelling on the same incident, reveals that the Sweet Home men had watched this supposedly 'secret' coupling. Both characters hence reflect on their intersecting pasts and, as the passage continues, appear to be drawn together, rather than pushed apart, by recollections of Halle and Sethe's conjugal union.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> "Sethe started to turn over on her stomach but changed her mind. She did not want to call Paul D's attention back to her, so she settled for crossing her ankles. But Paul D noticed the movement as well as the change in her breathing" (24).

<sup>135</sup> "Paul D sighed and turned over. Sethe took the opportunity afforded by his movement to shift as well. Looking at Paul D's back, she remembered that some of the corn stalks broke, folded down over Halle's back, and among the things her fingers clutched were husk and cornsilk hair. How loose the silk. How jailed down the juice. The jealous admiration of the watching men melted with the feast of new corn they allowed themselves that night ... Paul D couldn't remember how they'd finally cooked those ears too young to eat" (27).

Eventually they join in envisaging sexualised corn imagery, textually wedded in an erotic celebration:

What *he* did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of *his* fingernail just under, so as not to graze a single kernel.

The pulling down of the tight sheath, the ripping sound always convinced *her* it hurt.

As soon as one strip of the husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to *him* its shy rows, exposed at last. How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavour ran free.

No matter what all your teeth and wet fingers anticipated, there was no accounting for the way that simple joy could shake you. How loose the silk.

How fine and loose and free [my emphasis] (27).

As the narrative movement back and forth between their consciousnesses becomes more frequent, such shifts no longer require the prompt of bodily touch but alternate freely. The discourses of the two characters merge as they both describe sexual pleasure in terms of the corn, creating a shared voicing that affirms Baby Suggs' message of physical gratification and love. This union contrasts with their previous dissatisfaction. Indeed, the sensual awakening that Sethe and Paul D attain can be seen to offer hope for the outcome of placing their stories side by side within the text as a whole.<sup>136</sup> This early scene describes a coming together that is perhaps echoed at the end of *Beloved* when the pair are reunited after estrangement. It also reveals the body as a fundamental vehicle of the narrative. Here physical experience and formal progression cannot be divorced as Morrison crafts what Lawrence terms a "convergence of sexuality, memory, and poetic figure".<sup>137</sup>

The relation of *Beloved*'s structure to its themes is a complex one. Morrison's concern with the somatic, in particular, gives rise to some compositional innovations. The text enacts dislocation and dissolution in its evocation of the trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage. Tropes of dismemberment and re-membering are central to this exploration. In addition, not only does the

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<sup>136</sup> Danille Taylor-Guthrie writes, "[t]he very premise of the novel is a dialogue between Paul D and Sethe who attempt to share their versions of the past to make a future together as a family. It is a duet that seeks the words to communicate the personal nightmare of slavery". Taylor-Guthrie, 'Who Are the Beloved?', p.119.

<sup>137</sup> Lawrence, p.238. See also Doyle, pp.217-8.



narrative work by circumlocution, following disrupted memory processes, but it also plays out the difficulties of articulating and apprehending suffering.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, perhaps Morrison's novel can be seen as one of the artistic attempts to bring pain "into a realm of shared discourse" identified by Scarry?<sup>139</sup> Certainly the author wants her reader to reach towards what slavery may have felt like. A model for her project can be found in Denver and Beloved's telling of the story of Denver's birth. Together the two girls recreate an event experienced by Sethe, "giving blood ... and a heartbeat" to the "scraps" they have been told (78). Their narrative participation brings the past alive, makes it real for them, and perhaps also delineates Morrison's idea of an empathetic imaginary. Her struggle to give voice to the horror of slavery through, what Gilroy terms, an "imaginative proximity to ... terror".<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Valerie Smith reads the closing lines of the novel in light of these ideas: "In the final section of *Beloved*, the sentence 'It was not a story to pass on' is repeated twice, once with the substitution of 'This' for 'It'. This refrain refers at least in part to the complicated, interwoven narratives of suffering contained within the text, re-emphasizing the unspeakability of the subject. It might point also to the novel itself, naming the difficulties that attend the project of writing a novel about slavery ... The multiple meanings of the phrase 'to pass on', suggesting that this is a story that cannot be told yet must be told". Smith, p.353.

<sup>139</sup> Scarry, p.9.

<sup>140</sup> Gilroy discusses "the ways in which some black writers have already begun the vital work of enquiring into terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance". Gilroy, p.218. Of Morrison he writes, "[h]er work points to and celebrates some of the strategies for summoning up the past devised by black writers whose minority modernism can be defined precisely through its imaginative proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding and lead back from contemporary racial violence, through lynching, towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage". Gilroy, p.222.

### Chapter Three - *Jazz*

This chapter examines the theme and figure of dislocation in Toni Morrison's sixth novel, *Jazz*. It is divided into three parts, firstly addressing the text's depiction of the Great Migration and returning to questions of the geographic experience of African Americans raised in Chapter One. Through the stories of Joe and Violet Trace Morrison explores the symbolic sites of North and South. In particular, the space of New York City is positively aligned with modernity and a desire for posthistoricity by black migrants. Yet, I argue, through its portrayal of the Traces' alienation and disassociation, the novel poses a form of double-consciousness experienced in, and induced by, the urban North. I suggest that although it is associated with dispossession, Joe and Violet have to renegotiate their relationship to the South (and therefore the past) in order to recover a sense of communal belonging and historical connection, indeed, to reinvent their lives in the City.

My chapter next considers *Jazz*'s use of corporeal metaphors to figure the familial displacement engendered by slavery, in particular the orphanhood of Golden Gray. On discovering his mixed racial origins, this character experiences confusion and disruption. Yet, I propose that through an encounter with Wild Morrison describes his affirmative realisation of his blackness. I also investigate how the text uses the motif of a phantom limb to represent deracination and generational isolation. Imagery of amputation and incompleteness offers, I contend, a reworking of psychoanalytic theories of a perceptual anatomy. Chapter Three concludes with a reading of *Jazz*'s unusual first person narrator that positions the novel within a longstanding black literary tradition concerned with issues of orality and literacy. Morrison's revision of the trope of the Talking Book, I argue, evokes the characteristics of performative art forms and creates a voicing that signifies on, and situates itself within, a black Atlantic nexus of influence initiated by some of the earliest narratives by ex-slaves.

This chapter makes reference to the work of Robert Stepto and Henry Louis Gates Jr., W. E. B. DuBois' and Frantz Fanon's explorations of racial identity, and Jacques Lacan's theories of body image.

## I. The Tracks and Cracks of Urban Modernity

In *Jazz* Toni Morrison investigates the dynamics and effects of the so-called Great Migration, describing a symbolic geography of North and South and exploring the significance of New York City in particular, for African Americans. Set in Harlem during the 1920s, the novel makes frequent reference to the massive internal relocation of blacks that created this distinctive urban neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> Before and after the turn of the century ex-slaves and their descendents from the rural South were drawn to Northern cities by promises of the freedom and prosperity to be had there. As *Jazz* details, these migrants were also often forced out of the South by economic disadvantage and dispossession, anti-black violence and the various other forms of racial oppression that persisted long after slavery. Despite its affirmative association with license and modernity, the City is, as I will demonstrate, in addition connected to displacement and alienation. Thus Morrison extends her engagement with the dislocatory experiences of African Americans.

Of such demographic movement the author comments,

it seems to me that migration was a major event in the cultural history of this country ... [that] something modern and new happened after the Civil War. Of course, a number of things changed, but the era was most clearly marked by the disowning and dispossession of ex-slaves. These ex-slaves ... often tried to escape their problems by migrating to the city. I was fascinated by the thought of what the city must have meant to them ... to rural people living there in their

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Denard alludes to the “collective experience of nearly four-million African Americans who left the South between Reconstruction and World War II and migrated ... North in what is historically referred to as ‘The Great Migration’”. Carolyn Denard, ‘Toni Morrison and the American South: Introduction’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), i-vii (p.i). *Jazz* describes coming to New York City in these terms: “Some were slow about it and traveled from Georgia to Illinois, to the City, back to Georgia, out to San Diego and finally, shaking their heads, surrendered themselves to the City. Others knew right away that it was for them, this City and no other. They came on a whim ... They came after much planning, many letters written to and from, to make sure and know how much and where. They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short. Discharged with or without honor, fired with or without severance, dispossessed with or without notice ... However, they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement – there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than a heifer’s stall ... they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did” (32-3).

own number. The city must have seemed so exciting and wonderful, so much the place to be.<sup>2</sup>

Although celebratory of the exhilarating space of New York, *Jazz* also depicts communal and familial displacement, a sense of estrangement in the city. Indeed, departing the South of sharecropping, lynching and Jim Crow laws sometimes, in addition, meant leaving behind homes, sites of belonging. In some respects the Great Migration is hence figured as an echo of the Middle Passage, the forcible removal of Africans to the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Morrison's interest in relocation is also played out by the complex temporal and spatial shifts of her narrative. The novel's structure shuttles readers between the rural Souths of both slavery and Reconstruction, and the transforming urban North of the early Twentieth Century. Memories of 'down home' surface repeatedly in the narratives of migrant characters, positioning the South as a repository of the past, as integral to the history that engendered the contemporary Harlem Renaissance.<sup>4</sup>

Set in the Jazz Age, a period of burgeoning African American artistic creativity, the novel takes its title from an innovative musical genre enabled by black migration. As Veronique Lesoinne observes, "[t]he very title evokes in our mind the fluid, hybrid musical form which evolved primarily in urban African American communities".<sup>5</sup> Description of music within the text helps to establish the license, passion and excitement of 1920s Harlem. Morrison's prose in addition, however, can be seen to aspire to a jazz style. Indeed, an abundance of critical material considering the writing of *Jazz* in terms of musical composition has been produced, perhaps as a result of the author's own extensive discussion

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<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', *The Paris Review*, 35, 128 (1993), 82-125 (p.112).

<sup>3</sup> Rodrigues suggestively finds "the novel's major theme" to be "the impact of their most recent move on the psyche of a people. The earlier 'move', over two hundred years ago, had taken place on black slave ships from a land beyond the sea. This time the journey, from the rural South – which for many of the uprooted had begun to feel like home – to the industrial North, from country to city, was not as traumatic but was profound. It changed them". Eusebio L. Rodrigues, 'Experiencing Jazz', in *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*, ed. by Nancy J. Peterson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.245-266 (p.256).

<sup>4</sup> As Eckard identifies, "[t]he shift in language and imagery between country and city creates a dynamic tension between rural and urban life, past and present, innocence and corruption". Paula Gallant Eckard, 'The Interplay of Music, Language and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*', *CLA Journal*, 38, 1 (1994), 11-19 (p.15). And as Carolyn Denard points out, "the South ... was transformed from a site of 'exile' to a site of 'home' when Blacks migrated North". Denard, 'Introduction', p.vi.

<sup>5</sup> Veronique Lesoinne, 'Answering Jazz's Call: Experiencing Toni Morrison's *Jazz*', *MELUS*, 22, 3 (1997), 151-166 (pp.151-2).

of black aesthetic traditions.<sup>6</sup> Given that Morrison has explicitly stated “[t]he book is a jazz gesture”, it is little wonder that musical readings of it have proliferated.<sup>7</sup> Yet the predominance of this type of analysis has perhaps led to neglect of other aspects of the novel. In addition, whilst some critics make convincing attempts to detail Morrison’s “willed use of a jazz aesthetic as a pivotal structural device”, for example Eusebio Rodrigues and Alan Rice, others assume a simplistic correlation between musical forms and the narrative, failing to explicate the necessary evidence.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In a discussion with Paul Gilroy she explains, “[m]y parallel is always the music, because all of the strategies of the art are there. All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you’ve never touched it ... in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity ... I’ve tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing – certain kinds of repetition – its profound simplicity”. Toni Morrison, ‘Living Memory: a meeting with Toni Morrison’, in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture*, by Paul Gilroy (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), pp.175-182 (pp.181-2). Elsewhere she comments, “[w]hen Keith Jarrett plays ‘Ol’ Man River’, the delight and satisfaction is not so much in the melody itself but in recognizing it when it surfaces and when it is hidden and when it goes away completely, what is put in its place. Not so much in the original line as in all the echoes and shades and turns and pivots Jarrett plays around it. I was trying to do something similar with the plot in *Jazz* ... I wanted the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it were a prism, constantly turning. This playful aspect of *Jazz* may well cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody, who want to know what happened, who did it and why. But the jazz-like structure wasn’t a secondary thing for me – it was the *raison d’être* of the book”. Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, p.110.

<sup>7</sup> Morrison quoted by Christopher Bigsby, ‘Jazz Queen’, *The Independent*, 26 April 1992, 28-29 (p.29). For early definitions of blues and jazz impulses within literature see Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p.78 & p.234. See also Gayl Jones’ discussion of how musical forms are translated into print. Gayle Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.200. Among the critics who attempt to read *Jazz* along these lines are Roberta Rubenstein, ‘Singing the Blues / Reclaiming Jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 31, 2 (1998), 147-163, Elizabeth Cannon, ‘Following the Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*’, *African American Review*, 31, 2 (1997), 235-247, Barbara Williams Lewis, ‘The Function of Jazz in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*’, in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp.271-281, Lesoinne (see previous reference), Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Judylyn S. Ryan and Estella Conwill Majozo, ‘Jazz ... On the Site of Memory’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 125-152, Henry Louis Gates Jr., ‘Review of *Jazz*’, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.52-55, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Rice, ‘Jazzing It Up A Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison’s Jazzy Prose Style’, *Journal of American Studies*, 28, 3 (1994), 423-432 (p.423). In this essay Rice identifies the technical use of ‘pause breaks’, antiphony and ‘the cut’ in Morrison’s pre-*Jazz* novels. In a more recent piece he explores how the jazz performance’s combination of communal remembrance (signification on old material through repetitious rhythmic figures) and improvisation, immediacy, invention, is useful for Morrison as her fiction creates riffs on the past. Alan Rice, ‘It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing: Jazz’s Many Uses for Toni Morrison’, in *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*, ed. by Saadi A. Simawe (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), pp.153-180. This is witnessed in *Jazz*, for example, as discourse shifts back and forth between ‘presentness’ in

In *Jazz* Morrison attempts to capture an era that was, she believes, fundamental to the shaping of contemporary America. Locating the point at which African American culture became integral to U.S. society she writes, “[f]or me, jazz was the moment when Blacks took the country over in terms of its tone”.<sup>9</sup>

[T]he music ... began to change in the 1920s. It always changes, but this was the period of ... jazz, instead of the spirituals begging for relief or the coded language of escape from slavery ... Anyway, some of the elements of that period seem so pervasive because I think it affected America and the world. Jazz became the sign of modernity, a license that black people would try desperately to express.<sup>10</sup>

Morrison’s interest in music is thus associated with a particular sense of the modern, of “license”. Indeed, her tale of passion and excess can be seen as an exploration of the new freedoms and forms of expression available to African Americans in the urban North.<sup>11</sup> Literary representations of the 1920s have tended to depict high society whites but, according to the author, “the people who enabled the core and the shape of that period were, of course, black people, whose culture was ... being constantly invented and improvised ... The word jazz seems to encompass all of that”.<sup>12</sup> The novel’s title was hence intended to

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the North and Southern pasts, playing across time and space. Rodrigues shares with Rice an approach grounded in knowledge of musical modes and direct textual reference. He examines Morrison’s use of language and punctuation to form run-on sounds, intricate rhymes and a fluctuating tempo, “to recreate the impact of jazz”. Rodrigues, p.247. Rodrigues also discusses *Jazz*’s improvisatory ‘solos’ and its transitional slurs and glides across sections and syntax. “The first few pages, like a twelve-bar jazz ‘tune’ ... tell in summary the whole story of Violet and Joe and Dorcas, a story repeated and modulated at the end by that of Violet and Joe and Felice ... In between ... are amplifications, with improvisations, variations and solo statements, a virtuoso display of jazz play”. Rodrigues, p.252.

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison’, with Carolyn Denard, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 1-16 (p.15).

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, *Belles Lettres*, 10, 2 (1995), 40-43 (p.40).

<sup>11</sup> She writes, “[o]bviously, jazz was considered – as all new music is – to be devil music ... But for some black people jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can imagine what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned ... Blues and jazz represented ownership of one’s own emotions. So of course it is excessive and overdone: tragedy in jazz is relished, almost as though a happy ending would take away some of its glamour, its flair”. Morrison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, p.113.

<sup>12</sup> Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.41. The archetypal representation of 1920s New York, *The Great Gatsby*, is evoked only at the very end of Morrison’s narrative through reference to “Long Island debutantes, the sparkling fringes of daring short skirts ... music that intoxicates ... champagne” (227). Yet in *Jazz* this world is driven by “the sound of snapping fingers”, by “shade” (226-7). Here it is suggested that a shadowy and rhythmic presence lies behind the glittering socialite circles of the city: “The click of dark and snapping fingers drives them to Roseland, to Bunny’s; boardwalks by the sea. Into places their fathers have warned them about and their mothers shudder to think of ... Pushed away into certain streets, restricted from others,

capture the era's dynamism, reclaiming it as driven by New World blacks. And this can perhaps be seen as furthering the author's project of describing an African American modernity engendered by the disruption of slavery.

Arrival in New York appears to enable self-discovery or rebirth. The narrator comments "how soon country people forget":

The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There ... they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger riskier selves. And ... they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like ... what they start to love is the way a person is in the City (33).

The metropolis fosters confidence, attitude and a heightened sense of individual agency. Previous codes or bonds are abandoned in this space of liberty: "the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it ... it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do" (8-9). The City seems to endorse self-indulgence and accommodate indiscretion. Indeed, in an unusual interpretation of emancipation, of claiming selfhood, Morrison notes, "for everyday people, one of the most interesting things was a freedom ... to own your own body, to be immoral".<sup>13</sup> Such thrill and "desire" contribute to her depiction of the urban North as a site of license, something explored through the stories of Joe and Violet Trace (34).

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making it possible for the inhabitants to sigh and sleep in relief, the shade stretches – just there – at the edge of the dream" (227). This presence, I propose, is the African American one erased from texts like Fitzgerald's: "Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks downtown and acres of lawned neighborhoods in Sag Harbor cannot see them, the clicking is there" (226). Morrison thus reclaims the 1920s: "I wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age, and to never use the word". Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', p.117.

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, 'Interview with Angels Carabi', p.40. The author observes, "[a]t that time, when ex-slaves were moving into the city, running away from something that was constricting and killing them ... they were in a very limiting environment. But when you listen to their music – the beginnings of jazz – you realize that they are talking about something else. They are talking about love, about loss. But there is such grandeur, such satisfaction in those lyrics ... It's as though the whole tragedy of choosing somebody, risking love, risking emotion, risking sensuality, and then losing it all didn't matter, since it was their choice. Exercising choice in who you love was a major, major thing. And the music reinforced the idea of love as a space where one could negotiate freedom". Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', pp.112-3.

Scenes conveying the excitement of New York City are described frequently within the novel, one of the earliest being the first person narrator's own impression:

I'm crazy about this City.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong ... top-notch and indestructible – like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead ... Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everyone was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath (7).

This passage evokes the exhilaration, the captivating power of the metropolis. This is achieved, in part, through its distinctive prose form which propels the reader forward, its use of vernacular language and speech patterns to create the effect of orality, but also a quickening of pace. The narrator emphasises the visual, “I see looking faces”, and celebrates the dramatic sights that the City presents, “[d]aylight slants like a razor”. He or she also describes the sensations such a landscape inspires: “makes me dream tall and feel in on things”, “top-notch and indestructible”. The speaker remains difficult to situate in this space, yet appears to be positioned on high, phrases like “[w]hen I look over” and “[t]he people down there” indicating some kind of omniscient perspective. Sound also plays a part in the stimulating urban experience: “clarinets ... the voices of sorrowful women”. The City is, however, perhaps most strikingly marked by a dualism created by sunlit high rises and street level shade. Separated by a slash are the brightly illuminated towers and bridges and a darker underworld associated with violence, passion and blues. Such juxtapositions, such extremes, pervade Morrison's vision of New York.



This “City in 1926” is allied with a positive sense of modernity. Indeed, set after the Great War and before the Depression, *Jazz* explores a particular period of optimism and spirit of invulnerability. New urban communities and possibilities (presumably engendered by Northern industrialisation) give rise to a feeling that “everything’s ahead”. The narrator proclaims “[h]ere comes the new ... History is over”, perceiving the present moment as the dawning of the modern world, as divorced from the past. Such hopes have extra meaning for African Americans not only encouraged to “dream tall”, but also believing “[t]here goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff”. Indeed, the temporal rupture of modern life described here suggests that slavery can be left behind. Instead of recalling former oppression, “[t]he way everyone was then and there”, black migrants desire a new start, drawing a line under previous suffering and subjugation. This break has additional geographic implications as the South is associated with the traumatic past and the North with the promising future. Occupying for the first time decent housing in a relatively smart neighbourhood, “flocking to pay checks and streets full of themselves”, black New Yorkers were elated at their advances (58).<sup>14</sup> Such attitudes can perhaps be related to one of the most famous publications of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke’s manifesto proclaiming a time of unprecedented black creativity and progress, *The New Negro*.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the City’s new opportunities and positive connotations, however, residency there does have a downside. Not only is Harlem thrilling, it is also a space where one has to be on guard, where “nothing [is] safe” (9). According to the narrator, “[h]ospitality is gold in this City; you have to be clever to figure out

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<sup>14</sup> According to Joe, “just before the war, whole blocks was let to colored. Nice. Not like downtown. These had five, six rooms; some had ten and if you could manage fifty, sixty dollars a month, you could have one” (127). For details of this development see Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: MacMillan, 1997), pp.310-11. “‘Harlem’ signified something radically different than it had a short decade ago; it meant a black community, the ‘race capital’, as Alan Locke dubbed it, of the world”. Douglas, p.310.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, 1968). Morrison even alludes to the intellectual community to which Locke belonged: “At last, at last, everything’s ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree” (7). Gurleen Grewal claims that the narrator “makes an ironic comment on the philosophy of the New Negro as envisioned by the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance”. “Here the smart ones are the educated elite and cosmopolitan literati” who attempted to distance their community from the past of slavery. Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*

how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time" (9). This way of life contrasts that associated with the South. Indeed, Morrison discusses what was surrendered on leaving rural homes: "You give up a lot, you know, to take advantage of benefits of urban or working life elsewhere ... Urban blacks were very much on the defensive".<sup>16</sup> The City is shown to make people more hostile, competitive, concerned with upward social mobility (see 18-19).<sup>17</sup> This loss of "communal posture" in New York accords with the pattern of "ascent" traced by Robert Stepto.<sup>18</sup> As Denise Heinze identifies, *Jazz's* message appears to be that "[b]lack people may experience a new found sense of individuation and autonomy in the city, but they relinquish a sense of responsibility to community".<sup>19</sup> City dwellers, as demonstrated by the stories of Joe and Violet, are depicted as not only independent, but also isolated. Regardless of its association with freedom, new financial, creative and personal possibilities, New York, in addition, remains fraught with danger and discrimination. Combined with description of black advances in white dominated professional preserves is a portrait of violence as commonplace.<sup>20</sup> And the corruption of the urban authorities is illustrated when Dorcas' aunt doesn't even attempt to prosecute her niece's killer: she "didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything" (4). Here the City's institutions are revealed as prejudiced, entirely unconcerned for black

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(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), pp.121-122. As I will explore, such attempts within the novel prove futile.

<sup>16</sup> Morrison, 'Blacks, Modernism, and the American South', pp.3-4.

<sup>17</sup> The effect of New York on migrants is demonstrated through an encounter involving some of Violet's hairdressing customers. According to Violet, "[t]he Dumfrey women were graceful, citified ladies whose father owned a store on 136<sup>th</sup> Street" (18). Yet their neighbour reveals that they come from "Cottown. Someplace nobody ever heard of" and that they "don't like it known" (18-19). Instead, "they'd have you believe" that "they were born [in the city]" (18). The neighbour describes them as "[h]incty ... stuck-up", saying "knew both of them from way back. Come up here, the whole family act like they never set eyes on me before ... We don't speak if we don't have to" (19). This episode reveals how the North is seen as superior to the small town South, how migration informed class difference.

<sup>18</sup> Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p.167.

<sup>19</sup> Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of 'Double-Consciousness': Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.117.

<sup>20</sup> "The A & P hires a colored clerk. Big-legged women with pink kitty tongues roll money into green tubes for later on ... Hoodlums hand out goodies, do their best to stay interesting ... Nobody wants to be an emergency at Harlem Hospital but if the Negro surgeon is visiting, pride cuts down the pain ... Nobody says it's pretty here ... What it is is decisive" (7-8).

victims.<sup>21</sup> Harlem may have its own social organisations, the “Salem Women’s Club” can assist needy cases, yet “there [are] no high schools ... a colored girl [can] attend” (6). Thus African Americans are failed by the law and cheated by a segregated and discriminatory public school system, no matter that this is the North and history is over.<sup>22</sup>

Analysis of the symbolic geography of *Jazz* can perhaps be furthered by reference to Stepto’s theory of narratives of ascent and immersion (outlined in Chapter One).<sup>23</sup> Stepto describes the trope of a Northward journey made by a black protagonist seeking to escape Southern oppression and obtain liberty and literacy in a new locale. This trajectory accords with that of the migrants who come to New York City in Morrison’s novel. According to Stepto’s model, such an ‘ascent’ induces alienation as the cultural heritage and communal belonging of the South cannot be sustained in the urban North. Morrison’s exploration of early Twentieth Century migration and dislocation does, as I will demonstrate, replicate this pattern.<sup>24</sup> Yet ultimately *Jazz* problematises Stepto’s polarisation of North and South (and the separation of present from past). In fact, survival in the City is eventually found to be possible only through a navigation of both the legacies of the South and the challenges of the North. Claims to posthistoricity are hence revealed as futile.<sup>25</sup> For Stepto the narrative of ascent and its

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<sup>21</sup> Later in the narrative brutality is suggested: “She would have called the police ... if everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider. To actually volunteer to talk to one ... to let him in her house, watch him adjust his hips in her chair to accommodate the blue steel that made him a man” (74).

<sup>22</sup> The vision of Harlem as a place of black liberation yet also deprivation is furthered elsewhere in the text: “it is worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue safe from fays and the things they think up; where the sidewalks ... are wider than the main roads of the towns where they were born and ... everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the post box (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barber shops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club ... or association imaginable” (10). Here the narrator’s bracketed comments work in counter point to the positive thrust of the passage, revealing which institutions the community lacks alongside the benefits and conveniences of Northern life.

<sup>23</sup> See Stepto, p.167.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Willis writes, “[t]he problem at the center of Morrison’s writing is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations”. Susan Willis, ‘Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison’, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.308-329 (p.309).

<sup>25</sup> Morrison’s posing of such issues might in some way be a response to the debate surrounding Fukuyama’s book *The End of History* published the same year as *Jazz*. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992). Her fictional project can

consequent isolation of the individual in the North, necessitates the formulation of a narrative of immersion, of descent into a South representative of belonging. He identifies an impulse to reverse the losses of the Great Migration. Yet *Jazz* does not feature such a journey, instead, as Ryan and Majozo identify, “depict[ing] a series of negotiations – between dispersion and rootedness, dislocation and relocation, trauma and triumph, South and North, village values and urban attitudes, rupture and continuity ... – which define the experience of diaspora for African Americans”.<sup>26</sup> It is from this departure point that I turn to the ‘cracks’ and ‘tracks’ of central characters, Joe and Violet.

The Traces (whose very name suggests the enduring residue of the past) are Southern migrants who, as a young couple, heard fantastical reports of urban life: standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning strangers’ shoes – got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one whole harvest ... In fact, there were streets where colored people owned all the stores; whole blocks of handsome colored men and women laughing all night and making money all day (106).

New York was hence associated with economic possibilities beyond the reach of most rural Southerners. Not only could money be made from “light work”, but also some African Americans were the proprietors of their own businesses (106). Here blacks could participate in commerce instead of being restricted to poorly paid agricultural labour. And as a space of conspicuous consumption, the City appeared to fulfil dreams of freedom and ownership. Its “[s]teel cars” promised the mobility and luxury unavailable in sedentary small town America (106).<sup>27</sup> The prospect of “whole blocks of handsome colored men and women” was, in addition, an exciting and affirmative one.

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also be seen as a reply to postmodernist theory and literature in general, a possibility suggested in a conversation with Gilroy: “Morrison savours the irony that black writers are descending deeper into historical concerns at the same time that the white literati are abolishing it in the name of something they call ‘post-modernism’. ‘History has become impossible for them ... It’s a big hole in the literature and art of the United States’”. Morrison, ‘Living Memory’, p.179.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan and Majozo, p.131.

<sup>27</sup> As Herman Beavers observes, “[t]he North conjures itself as a benign setting by replacing the indignity and finality of disenfranchisement and lynching with the cyclicity of commodification, desire, and consumption”. Herman Beavers, ‘The Politics of Space: Southernness and Manhood in the Fictions of Toni Morrison’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 61-78 (p.71).

Such visions of the City contrasted starkly with the dispossession experienced by African Americans in the South. Indeed, part of why migrants loved New York “was the spectre they left behind” (33). Economic hardship and political disempowerment drove the flow Northward and haunted black Southerners.<sup>28</sup> Violet, for example, is scarred by the memory of her mother being forcibly removed from a chair by whites reclaiming the contents of the family home and farm.<sup>29</sup> Joe was similarly marked by the eviction of his entire community in 1893: “Vienna burned to the ground. Red fire doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish: canceling every deed ... emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the country to another” (126). Not only were “nine hundred Negroes” dispossessed, but the fields “burned for months ... The little graveyards, with handmade crosses and sometimes a stone marker ... never stood a chance” (173-4). A black town was thus subject to wholesale displacement, its population forced into vagrancy, fleeing all over the States. The reference to “white sheets” could allude to the threat of the Ku Klux Klan or, alternatively, the official means of obtaining eviction, paperwork, for which the arsonists were too impatient. The inhabitants of Vienna had to abandon the homes and livelihoods they had established, for “[w]ith two days’ notice ... [h]ow can you plan where to go, and if you do know of a place you think will welcome you, where is the money to arrive?” (174). Such disempowerment illustrates how ex-slaves were kept as a financially dependent, and therefore more pliant, labour source. But Joe’s community was also exiled from its sites of remembrance, dislocated from family graves, dispersed by “guns and hemp” (173). The Traces’ experience of the fraudulent sharecropping system further illustrates the difficulties of claiming and retaining a space in the South. When, as newly weds, the couple were forced to farm some of “the worst land in the county” their debt to the landlord rose “from one hundred and eighty dollars to

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<sup>28</sup> Set against the animated and thrilling Northern streets are “[t]he slumped spines of the veterans of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion betrayed by the commander for whom they had fought like lunatics. The eyes of thousands, stupefied with disgust at having been imported by Mr. Armour, Mr. Swift, Mr. Montgomery Ward to break strikes then dismissed having done so. The broken shoes of two thousand Galveston longshoremen that Mr. Mallory would never pay fifty cents an hour like the white ones. The praying palms, the raspy breathing, the quiet children of the ones who had escaped ... after raving whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home (33).

<sup>29</sup> “[M]en came, talking low as though nobody was there but themselves, and picked around in our things, lifting out what they wanted – what was theirs, they said, although we cooked in it,

eight hundred" (126). Later when Joe brought his own piece of land he was dispossessed once more: "Like a fool I thought they'd let me keep it. They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed" (126). Such oppression, combined with the anti-black violence of Reconstruction, fuelled the Traces' desire to move North.<sup>30</sup>

Arriving in New York in 1906, Joe and Violet are captivated, their expectations of the City immediately surpassed: "carrying all of their belongings in one valise, they both knew right away that perfect was not the word. It was better than that" (107).<sup>31</sup> Although initially only able to afford "a railroad flat in the Tenderloin" and secure very menial labour, by 1925 the couple occupy a comfortable house on Lenox Avenue and work as a hairdresser and hotel waiter (127).<sup>32</sup> This fact for Joe demonstrates the social mobility possible in the urban North: "The buildings were like castles in pictures and we who had cleaned up everybody's mess since the beginning knew better than anybody how to keep them nice. We had plants and birds everywhere ... I had made it ... we all had it made" (127-9). The pleasure taken in maintaining and decorating black homes illustrated here appears to originate, in part, from a history of dispossession and subjugation. Such pride is also, however, perhaps reminiscent of Macon Dead's

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washed sheets in it, sat on it, ate off of it. That was after they had hauled away the plow, the scythe, the mule, the sow, the churn and the butter press" (98).

<sup>30</sup> *Jazz* details some Southern violence. Indeed, Joe struggles to express what he has witnessed: "I have seen some things in my time. In Virginia. Two of my step brothers. Hurt bad ... There was a girl, too. Visiting her folks up by Crossland. Just a girl" (128). In addition, reference is made to a "young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to a log, his grandmother refusing to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse" (101). Through this, only briefly mentioned, incident Morrison explores the phenomenon of lynching, its random and terrifying nature, but also the suffering of those left to mourn the victim. White aggression is shown to stem from deep-seated anxieties about the presence and appropriate station of black Americans: "Crackers in the South mad cause Negroes were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming" (128).

<sup>31</sup> "Violet and Joe left Tyrell ... and boarded the colored section of the Southern Sky. When the train trembled approaching ... the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side ... They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them" (30-2). The Traces' journey North was hence accompanied by a sense of risk and danger as well as thrill and seduction.

<sup>32</sup> "Violet went into service and [Joe] worked everything from whitefolks shoe leather to cigars ... cleaned fish at night and toilets in the day" (127). Eventually they "left the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third and moved uptown" (127). Joe explains, "[w]hen the rents got raised and raised again, and the stores doubled the price of uptown beef and let the whitefolk's meat stay the same, I got me a little sideline selling Cleopatra products in the neighborhood" (128). To supplement his income, Joe touts cosmetics within the black community. As Violet is a self-employed hairdresser, both of the Traces hence carve out some independence in one of the few City businesses unreliable on a white market.

bourgeois aspiration, his accumulation of property, described in *Song of Solomon*. Certainly although the Traces give every outward appearance of success, their personal lives are discontented. By 1926 their relationship has broken down and the rooms of their apartment “are like ... empty birdcages wrapped in cloth” (11). Indeed, both Joe and Violet are depicted as alienated, isolated, unable to control their actions. As Barnes points out, the migrants “find themselves culturally unmoored and adrift ... their identities begin to erode, and they experience themselves as fragmented, foreign, without function”.<sup>33</sup>

The Traces’ estrangement can be read in terms of W. E. B. DuBois’ theory of African American “double-consciousness”:

the Negro is ... born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others ... One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.<sup>34</sup>

DuBois’ proposition of duality suggests the difficulty of negotiating both blackness and Americanness, something that also preoccupies Morrison as an author. In *Jazz*, however, I argue that Joe and Violet experience a form of double-consciousness relating to the site of the urban North. Whilst characters such as Violet, Felice and Dorcas are subject to a racialised external gaze when they internalise white notions of beauty, as I will explore, it is an optic of the City itself that causes the Traces’ deracination and disassociation. Migration and its concomitant dislocations leads to alienation, to being determined from without by the ‘modernity’, license, attitude and excess of the streets of New York.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the excitement and drama of the City gives rise to a conflict

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<sup>33</sup> Deborah Barnes, ‘Movin’ on up: The Madness of Migration in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*’, in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp.283-295 (p.290).

<sup>34</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), pp.16-17.

<sup>35</sup> This is, in part, illustrated by description of migrants’ relationship to the sights of the City: “What they start to love is the way a person is in the City ... how men accommodate themselves to tall buildings and wee porches, what a woman looks like moving in a crowd, or how shocking her profile is against the backdrop of the East River” (33-4).

between the migrants' so-called "stronger riskier selves" and the selves that they came North with (33). My reading thus employs DuBois' term in a new way in order to investigate Morrison's depiction of trajectories of displacement.

The opening of *Jazz* establishes the extent of the Traces' disorientation, revealing both Joe's affair with, and murder of, Dorcas and Violet's act of vengeance at her funeral. Violet's dislocation is figured through what are termed "private cracks" (22).

[D]ark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things ... But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done ... Closely examined [the globe light] shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles into these cracks (23).

Violet's vision disconnects what she does, her actions, from her self. She erases her own self-image from the scenes of her urban life. This indicates disassociation, something also felt by Zora Neale Hurston's heroine, Janie, during her unhappy marriage to Jody Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>36</sup> Whilst Janie, however, absents herself from an oppressive domestic situation in order to help her endure it, Violet finds her whole being to be disintegrating. As Hardack observes, "the ... fissure Violet experiences, her inability to identify with her body as her self, reflects a fragmentation of language and consciousness".<sup>37</sup> Her world is full of potentially dangerous cracks, causing her to live in fear of falling into one, of losing control. Morrison hence uses imagery of fracture to explore an experience of depersonalisation and breakdown in the City.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "One day [Janie] sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes". Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (London: Virago, 1986), p.119.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Hardack, "'A Music Seeking Its Words': Double-Timing and Double-Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", *Callaloo*, 18, 2 (1995), 451-471 (p.457).

<sup>38</sup> According to Werner, she echoes other "psychological modernists" by employing this figure. Craig Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p.296.



A degeneration of language is the first symptom of Violet's problem: "Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy, Violet had stumbled into a crack or two. Felt the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). The disruption of Violet's speech is illustrated by an apparently random remark made during her discussion of the numbers with Joe: "Got a mind to double it with an ought and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you" (24). Linguistic "collapses" like these, portentous or otherwise, are "troublesome" so to cover them up she grows silent (24). This withdrawal then exacerbates her isolation and the rift between her and Joe.

Violet's disassociated state is further explored through her formulation of "*that* Violet" (89). In another manifestation of her double-consciousness she attributes her violent acts, uncontrollable feelings and "renegade tongue" to another, to an alter-ego who does things that she never would (24). "Where she, last in line at the car stop, noticed a child's cold wrist jutting out of a too-short, hand-me-down coat, *that* Violet slammed past a whitewoman into the seat of a trolley four minutes late" (89-90). Violet feels as if another being inhabits her body, taking over when, for example, she attacks Dorcas' corpse: "Before she knew what was going on, the boy ushers ... were reaching towards the blade she ... was surprised to see now aimed at the girl's haughty, secret face" (90-1). "[*T*]hat kicking, growling Violet" had to be carried from the church "while she looked on in amazement" (92). Violet hence experiences "depersonalisation", defined by Bousoin as a "state of altered consciousness ... in which individuals report feeling a sense of unreality about the self or that the real self is distanced or that they are observing the self from the outside".<sup>39</sup> She appears to have been at a remove from the aggression that she exhibited. Indeed, others saw the knife she carried and perceived her intent before she herself did. This reveals her split from "that other Violet" who "peeped out through her eyes and saw other things" (89). Violet's "twoness" is hence figured through an assertive and violent self and a passive, almost insensible self. Her experience of watching her own actions can be related to DuBois' description of "looking at one's self through the eyes of

others".<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Violet is disconnected from *that* Violet to the extent that her consciousness is aligned with the rest of the church congregation surprised by her attack. Whilst for DuBois the eyes through which African Americans view themselves are those of the dominant European American culture, in *Jazz* it is the City that causes alienation and creates such an external determinant.<sup>41</sup>

Violet's self-doubt, however, is, in part, linked to her internalisation of a hierarchy of racial features which privileges whiteness. This destructive legacy was passed on to her by True Belle who idealised her mistress' blonde son. Having heard about this "beautiful young man" all her life, Violet devalues her own darkness, so demonstrating her participation in "a world which ... only lets [the Negro] see himself through the revelation of the other world" (139).<sup>42</sup> Violet's insecurity was compounded by Joe's choice of light skinned Dorcas as a lover and it can only be overcome when she confronts, and renegotiates her relationship to her familial past.<sup>43</sup> Yet Violet's disrupted sense of selfhood, her cracks, emerges from not just this form of self-negation.

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<sup>39</sup> Brooks J. Bouson, *Quiet as it's kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p.173.

<sup>40</sup> DuBois, pp.16-17.

<sup>41</sup> Werner suggestively observes, "Morrison insists that the experience of division must be understood not only in relation to race and gender but also to the split between village and city". Werner, p.289. And in a useful essay on double-consciousness Richard Hardack writes, "Black American characters often see themselves, and even their bodies, as others, internalizing their attributed roles as spectral observers of themselves. Faulkner's Joe Christmas and Wright's Bigger Thomas, for instance, incessantly watch themselves from afar, locating a self split into parts ... Characters who are split into observed and observing selves ... lose conscious control of their bodies ... they begin to observe themselves acting in an involuntary, and often expressly violent manner". Hardack, p.453. Just as another self possessed Bigger Thomas and started acting for him in *Native Son*, so it would appear that in *Jazz* an "other Violet ... walked about the city in [Violet's] skin" (89). Hardack reads this in terms of gender: "Like Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas, Violet in *Jazz* remains virtually unaware that she is armed ... Traditionally associated with typically violent male characters, in Morrison's hands double-consciousness becomes a facet of black women as well as men, and hence of a feminist modernity". Hardack, p.455.

<sup>42</sup> DuBois, p.16. The narrator speculates, "[m]aybe that is why Violet is a hairdresser – all those years of listening to her ... grandmother" tell stories of a household where "there was nothing to do but raise and adore [a] blond boy" (17). This elevation of Caucasian physical characteristics is reminiscent of the adoption of white ideals of beauty by blacks as explored in *The Bluest Eye* through the character of Pecola (and to a lesser extent in *Song of Solomon* through Hagar). It is a theme also explored in earlier texts such as George Schuyler's *Black No More* (London: The X Press, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Wondering what Joe might have seen in Dorcas, Violet asks "[a] young me with high-yellow skin instead of black? A young me with long wavy hair instead of short? Or a not me at all ... Somebody golden, like my own golden boy, who I never ever saw but who tore up my girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers?" (97). She later explains to Felice, "[m]y

Significantly Violet associates the physical force that *that* Violet exerts at the funeral with herself at an earlier age:

She had not been that strong since Virginia, since she loaded hay and handled the mule wagon like a full-grown man. But twenty years doing hair in the City had softened her arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers ... the City took away the back and arm power she used to boast of. A power *that* Violet had not lost because she gave the usher boys ... a serious time (92).

Whilst she perceives *that* Violet as possessing strength and agency, Violet experiences her contemporary self as weakened and helpless, disempowered by urban life. She is nostalgic for what she believes she has lost: "The hips she came here with were gone too" (94). Indeed, by supplementing her diet, Violet attempts to fill out her "pick thin" body, to regain substance and stature and hence to wrest back the control she lacks (206).<sup>44</sup> Next to *that* Violet, she feels pitiful: "Whenever she thought about *that* Violet ... she knew there was no shame there, no disgust. That was hers alone" (94). Violet thus assumes a position of abjection, unable to reconcile her renegade, yet assertive actions with her regret and humiliation. She also connects to the South a sense of coherence and strength.

Violet's association of the North with depletion is furthered by her childlessness. On moving to the City the Traces had decided not to start a family, both looked with pity at "the women with little children, strung like beads over suitcases ... Years later, however, when Violet was forty, she was already staring at infants, hesitating in front of toys displayed at Christmas" (107). She experiences what Derek Alwes terms "generational isolation", having neither parents nor offspring.<sup>45</sup> This deprivation led her to attempt to steal a

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grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child ... He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn't know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it" (208).

<sup>44</sup> For example, "[s]he had meant to bring a package of Dr. Dee's Nerve and Flesh Builder to stir into the malted milkshake, because the milkshakes alone didn't seem to be doing any good" (93-4). As Harding and Martin note, "[s]he makes futile attempts at compensation, consuming malted milkshakes in order to achieve the fullness ... she imagines she had before coming to the city". Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), p.31.

<sup>45</sup> Derek Alwes, 'The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*', *African American Review*, 30, 3 (1996), 353-365 (p.354).

baby and then to imagine Dorcas to be the child she miscarried earlier in life, confused as to whether the girl was “[t]he scheming bitch ... who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb?” (109).<sup>46</sup> This “mother-hunger” is informed by her own difficult experience of childhood (108). Violet not only grew up in poverty, but her father was, in addition, largely absent from home whilst her mother, after a period of depression, committed suicide: “The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?” (102). Violet’s lack hence originated from her Southern past. Yet it is in the City that this childlessness becomes devastating, that her alienation creates a terrible appetite for the relationship that she believes will bring her belonging and wholeness.

Violet’s maternal longing and self-loathing both stem from her life before migration. The effects of dislocation are felt in the South as well as the North. In the City, however, displaced from community and permitted license, her “cracks” grow and spread. As Grewal observes, “[t]he past has constituted disturbances and hungers that will not go away in the city but that the city will augment in new ways”.<sup>47</sup> In Morrison’s depiction of a form of double-consciousness induced by urban modernity, Violet experiences such disassociation and deracination that she feels split in two.

During the course of the narrative of *Jazz*, however, Violet does find her own voice and so reconciles her previously divided selves. Unlike Joe and Dorcas, she is not attributed a first person discourse in quotation marks. Rather her story is told in the fourth section of the novel by the narrator (see 84-114). It is framed by the character’s visit to a drugstore, following her thoughts and recollections whilst she sits drinking a milkshake. Although she is referred to largely in the third person, as the narrator describes Violet’s recent breakdown, the narrative shifts, briefly allowing her own voice to be heard. Through free indirect style,

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<sup>46</sup> “Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming. Just when her breasts were finally flat enough not to need the binders the young women wore to sport the chest of a soft boy ... mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out. When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter (108-9).

<sup>47</sup> Grewal, p.126.

Violet is thus enabled to offer a short but significant first person enunciation. Reflecting on Joe's adultery she questions, "while I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody's kitchen to do their hair" (95). Here Violet uses "I" for the very first time. Simultaneous with this step is a revelation about her anger towards Dorcas: "the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold onto, No! *that* Violet is not somebody walking around town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me!" (95-6). This assertion marks the beginning of Violet's reaffirmation of selfhood. In her forthright claim to Joe are echoes of the old Violet who was vocal, self-possessed and willing to fight for what was hers.<sup>48</sup> As Barnes puts it, "Violet must reclaim the powerful and controlling identity (or as she thinks of it, the muscles and hips) she lost upon leaving the South".<sup>49</sup> The split between aggressive *that* Violet and her silent, enfeebled opposite appears to have been mended, the two extremes meshed. This sense of recovery is reinforced at the end of the fourth section of the novel when Violet and her other self no longer see things differently: "she ... left the drugstore and noticed, at the same moment as *that* Violet did, that it was spring" (114). Such renewal signals perhaps the initiation of a different relation to the City?

Violet's understanding of her situation, her rehabilitation in the narrative present is brought about, in part, by a process of remembering her Southern past.<sup>50</sup> Sitting in the drugstore, she reconnects with the history she once thought she had left behind, recalling her hungry siblings, her father's exile following his involvement with the suppressed Readjuster party and her mother's suicidal leap into a well. Previously haunted by a "phantom father" and "the place [Rose Dear] had thrown herself into", Violet finally comes to terms with her sense of desertion (100-1). Indeed, in particular she gains insight into her mother's

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<sup>48</sup> "She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman ... She liked, and had, to get her way" (23). Violet now remembers and so revives her tenacity: "I have stood in cane fields in the middle of the night ... not stirring a speck in case he was near and I would miss him, and damn the snakes my man was coming for me and who or what was going to keep me from him? Plenty times, plenty times I have carried the welts given me by a two-tone peckerwood because I was late in the field row the next morning ... do what you will or may he was my Joe Trace. Mine" (96).

<sup>49</sup> Barnes, p.292.

desperation through her own breakdown: “Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn’t do it no more?” (110). This renegotiation allows her to move on, provides her with a means of comprehending her identity and her alienation.<sup>51</sup>

Another factor that helps Violet to overcome her fractured sense of self is the friendship she forms with Alice Manfred, aunt of Dorcas. Indeed, it is soon after a visit to Alice that Violet is reconciled to *that* Violet. This relationship provides female company, but also support and a sharing of experiences previously lacking from Violet’s life in the City. She first goes to Alice to find out about Dorcas, “I wanted to see what kind of girl he’d rather me be”, but then a more lasting and mutually sustaining bond develops between the two women (82). To each other they can express their sense of failure. Together Violet and Alice forge a community within which to confront, in particular, their lack of adult wisdom: “We born around the same time ... We women, me and you ... Don’t just say I’m grown and ought to know. I don’t. I’m fifty and I don’t know nothing” (110). Their incapacity is associated with the City as a space of distraction and forgetting. Migration North has caused dislocation from ancestral influence and disrupted the passage to maturity. Neither Violet nor Alice has become an elder able to offer useful instruction to younger generations. Yet together they begin to reflect on the changes wrought by urban life. Indeed, Violet wonders if “it was the City that produced a crooked kind of mourning for a rival young enough to be a daughter” (111). She comments, “[b]efore I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn’t have nothing but we didn’t miss it” (207). This would seem to indicate that migration was to blame for her disorientation. Yet by the end of her narrative Violet appears to have found a new way to navigate her contemporary city surroundings, one that involves reference back to the past.

One particular episode prompted by a domestic mishap involving Violet and Alice illustrates the importance of such remembering:

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<sup>50</sup> As Ryan and Majozo identify, “[i]n *Jazz* the American South is the milieu de memoire ... whose ‘remains’ survivors in the North must access through memory in order to re-create themselves in the City”. Ryan and Majozo, p.133.

In no time laughter was rocking them both. Violet was reminded of True Belle who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor, hungry and irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall ... They should have hated her ... But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better. They laughed too, even Rose Dear shook her head and smiled, and suddenly, the world was right side up. *Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious.* More complicated, more serious than tears [my emphasis] (113).

Violet is thus reminded of one of the valuable lessons of her Southern past. Not a destructive memory such as True Belle's idealisation of Golden Gray, but a positive legacy teaching that laughter is necessary, indeed, is a tool for survival. In spite of, or perhaps because of her family's destitute and pitiful state, laughter empowered True Belle to lift their spirits. And this knowledge enables Violet to consider her own recent actions somewhat differently: "Shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy ... fumbling the knife, too late anyway ... she laughed till she coughed" (114). This reappraisal signals the end of her disassociation for although she observes the sight of herself, Violet finally sees the ridiculous side of her revenge. Her ability to laugh at herself reveals new wisdom whilst the phrase *that* Violet is no longer employed.

Joe Trace, like Violet, is brought to a crisis by life in the City. Indeed, through Joe Morrison furthers *Jazz's* exploration of double-consciousness. Alienated from the fraternal belonging he once felt in the South, estranged from Violet, he discovers in his relationship with a young lover a closeness and understanding lacking from the rest of his urban existence. When this affair ends, however, distraught and out of control, he murders Dorcas. Like his wife, Joe experiences a sense of ineffectuality in the City, fearing the sapping of his self determination and strength. His adultery is presented as partly an effort to recapture something lost on leaving the South. Through it he temporarily finds self-affirmation, a

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<sup>51</sup> "Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small" (102-4).

“randy aggressiveness” that confirms his manhood (29). Just as Violet endows *that* Violet with the power and hips that she feels she lacks, so Joe uses Dorcas to try to resurrect a former self, his insecurity revealed by the jealousy he directs towards the young men of Harlem: “He cuts his eyes over to the sweetbacks lounging on the corner. There is something they have he wants” (119). Encouraged by New York’s license, he strives to achieve agency through an illicit affair and then violence, later unable to come to terms with his actions.

Joe’s breakdown, however, is also related to the spectre of his past, his orphaning. In particular, he is haunted by a painful episode from boyhood when he sought out his mother in the forests surrounding Vienna. Joe’s sense of rejection and unbelonging stems from Wild’s refusal to acknowledge him:

maybe he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he travelled with from then on, except for the fall of 1925 when he had somebody to tell it to. Somebody ... who knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like ... because she had it too (37-8).

Joe is able to share the alienation resulting from Wild’s ambiguous maternity with Dorcas alone for, as another orphan, she feels a similar emptiness.<sup>52</sup> Yet Joe’s “inside nothing” also parallels Violet’s traumatic relation to her difficult familial past. His mother, “[e]verywhere and nowhere”, neither absent nor present, overshadowed Joe’s childhood and filled the Southern woods for him: “All in all, he made three solitary journeys to find her ... he had lived first with the fear of her, then the joke of her, finally the obsession” (175-9).<sup>53</sup> As an adult he remains ashamed of needing her, condemning her as an “indecent speechless lurking insanity” (179). Plagued by memories of this relationship, in the City Joe resorts to violence in an attempt to prevent a second rejection.

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<sup>52</sup> “He rented a room ... to tell his new love things he never told his wife. Important things like how the hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream at dusk; how he can barely see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers in that light, so what makes him think he can see her hand even if she did decide to shove it through the bushes and confirm, for once and for all, that she was indeed his mother?” (36).

<sup>53</sup> As a boy he was humiliated by his longing for her: “he suddenly saw himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother ... who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him ... leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken self all over the country” (178).



Whilst Violet's loss of selfhood is figured by fissures and cracks, Joe's is explored through metaphors of tracking and tracing. His ability to follow a trail stems from his boyhood education in the Southern woods, yet imagery of hunting is linked to his isolation in the North. Joe looks for both his absent present mother and the lover who left him, associating tracking with lack, with searching for something missing. In the City, however, this activity becomes a dangerous compulsion:

I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough ... Something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look ... you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without (130).

Joe here blames "the trail" for the death of Dorcas, describing the shooting as inevitable, non-volitional (130). He implies disassociation, the feeling of being controlled by something else, so echoing Violet's separation of herself from her violent actions.<sup>54</sup> His aggression is also, however, contrary to the codes instilled in him by Henry Lestry: "He is a long way from Virginia ... when he sets out, armed to find Dorcas. He isn't thinking of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender ... she is not prey ... He is hunting for her though" (180).<sup>55</sup> Joe ignores his Southern training which cautioned "[n]ever hurt the young: nest eggs, roe, fledglings, fry", instead following a trail leading to disaster (181). Indeed, his attack is linked to the effects of urban life: "he is bound to the track ... That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're

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<sup>54</sup> "I had the gun but it was not the gun – it was my hand I wanted to touch you with" (130-1). IHardack finds that "Joe Trace's trailing of his mother and Dorcas, and finally his 'involuntary' murder of Dorcas, echo Bigger's violent sense of dislocation". Hardack, p.454.

<sup>55</sup> Hunter's Hunter is a gifted woodsman and a mentor to Joe. As Dimino has pointed out, he is reminiscent of "the Faulknerian hunt and the Faulknerian wilderness". Andrea Dimino, 'Toni Morrison and William Faulkner Remapping Culture', in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.31-47 (p.37). Joe says "[t]aught me two lessons I lived by all my life. One was the secret of kindness from whitepeople – they had to pity a thing before they could like it. The other – well, I forgot it" [my emphasis] (125). Indeed, whilst hunting Dorcas Joe reads the urban landscape as if trailing prey in the Southern forest: "Dog tracks and rabbit too, neat as the pattern on a Sunday tie scattered over the snow. One of those dogs must have weighed eighty pounds. The rest were small size; one limped" (133-4).

free ... You can't get off the track a City lays for you" (120).<sup>56</sup> Disoriented in the North, Joe is pictured as manipulated by an external agent, unable to disengage himself from the whirling streets of New York. The City thus induces depersonalisation, its own form of double-consciousness.

Joe's identity is also explored through the theme of adaptation. Envisaging a series of selves, he claims to have transformed himself eight times. This fluidity is related to his orphanage. Lacking parents and therefore an original name, Joe rejected the appellation of his adoptive family: "The first [change] was when I named my own self ... since nobody knew what it could or should have been" (123). On asking after his real mother and father he was told "O honey, they disappeared without a trace", hence on his first day at school he announced "I'm Trace, what they went off without" (124). This act signals recognition of his abandonment and the need for self invention. Joe's ensuing transformations can be seen as responses to his position as a displaced African American, constructing from traces a sequence of selves.<sup>57</sup> His urban life, however, distorts this survival strategy: "I'll never get over what I did to that girl. Never. I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many" (129). Joe's capacity to adapt, largely a useful tool, thus also appears to have facilitated his attack on Dorcas, his detachment in the City perhaps causing too great a disconnection from the traces of his past?

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<sup>56</sup> This motif is established when Violet and Joe first arrive in New York: "chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet" (32). As Beavers observes, "Joe Trace moves from being a man 'more comfortable in the woods than in a town' ... to a man seduced by the cityscape. But more than this, he moves from being a man whose woodsmanship makes him synonymous with agency – as a man who can find his way with little to nothing in the way of overt clues – to a man who embodies depletion, searching for what remains of the man he was prior to arriving in the North". Beavers, p.66.

<sup>57</sup> After life as a hunter then a sharecropper Joe tried to become a man of property: "I was twenty-eight years old and used to changing ... so in 1901 when Booker T. had a sandwich in the President's house, I was bold enough to do it again: decided to buy me a piece of land" (126). Then, once more dispossessed, Joe decided to migrate: "I changed up again ... in 1906 when I took my wife to Rome ... and boarded the Southern Sky for a northern one" (126-7). Assaulted during the street riots of 1917, Joe was similarly prompted to recreate himself: "after those whitemen took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me. Along with many a more ... that's what made me change again for the seventh time ... when I walked all the way, every goddam step of the way, with the three six nine" (128-9). Thus in 1919 Joe marched with the black soldiers returning to Harlem from World War I in an act of racial solidarity and pride that signalled a new optimism or defiance.

Addressing his lover, Joe nevertheless asserts transformation as an historical resource of African Americans:

Those old people, they knew it all. I talk about being new ... but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose ... And let me tell you, baby, in those days it was more than a state of mind (135).

For those who suffered enslavement being new *and* staying the same was necessary, the ability to reinvent a means to overcome, to survive. Combining a facility for adaptation with possession of a continuing sense of self enabled the endurance of persecution and prejudice. Joe observes “[y]ou could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life”, making an explicit allusion to Alain Locke’s manifesto for the Harlem Renaissance, but also positioning himself within a longstanding tradition (129). Reference to the need for coherence and improvisation, in addition, bears consideration in terms of music. Indeed, Morrison, through Joe, evokes ideas of ‘the changing same’, a phrase pertaining to black musical forms, evolving yet retentive of distinctive characteristics.<sup>58</sup> Such a paradigm suggests complex notions of African American identity as shifting and subversive, notions surely relating to the negotiation of the difficulties implied by double-consciousness.<sup>59</sup>

The narration of Joe’s story itself follows a pattern connected to adaptation. Indeed, just as Violet’s first person voice signals her emergent sense of a unified, assertive self, so Joe’s discourse reflects the restoration of his strategy of rooted change. In the fifth section of the novel the narrator relates Joe’s experiences, pausing to wonder how things might have ended “if he had stopped trailing that

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<sup>58</sup> Baraka, among others, discusses how even as it has changed, black music has remained the same, continuing patterns and impulses that can be traced back to Africa. See Amiri Baraka, ‘The Changing Same (R & B and the New Black Music)’, in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. by Addison Gayle (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1971), pp.112-125. The phrase ‘The Changing Same’ has also been employed by Deborah McDowell to describe a tradition of black women’s fiction. Deborah McDowell, *The Changing Same: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> The author comments, “[y]ou had to stay alert to political changes, because you never knew what people were going to do at any moment. So you had to be always on guard and be able to adjust quickly ... you know, the instinct for survival plus ‘joie de vivre’ was very important”. Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.41. In addition, in the character of Joe and his transformations we find an echo of Baraka’s own life story: “At forty years old then, I was acknowledging another tremendous change in my life. In my life of changes. (And how can you play the tune, if you don’t know the changes?)”. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroy Jones* (New York: Freundlich, 1984), p.312.

little fast thing all over town long enough to tell Stuck or Gistan or some neighbour?" (121). This speculation is answered by the first person voice of Joe who proceeds with his own narrative, inventing a reply to the above question.<sup>60</sup> Presented in quotation marks, his discourse forms an explicit 'response' to the narrator's 'call'. It thus exemplifies improvisation, working differently to the intervention through free indirect style of Violet's voicing.

Later the text presents a sequence of alternating voices to bring Joe's story to a resolution. Indeed, the seventh part of *Jazz* reveals how his Southern past is inextricable from his life in the City. As his search for Dorcas is linked to the earlier hunt for his mother, discourse shifts between the narrator referring to Joe in the third person and Joe's own narrative. The narrator describes Joe setting out to track Dorcas, yet then focus turns to a previous attempt to locate Wild when he discovered her home, a "natural burrow" (183). This tale is interrupted, however, by Joe's own fantasy of finding, and being reunited with Dorcas: "She will hold out her hand, walk toward me ... She's so glad I found her. Arching and soft" (183-4). Finally the narrator envisages Joe exploring his mother's cave, experiencing in it a sense of reconciliation and "peace" (184).<sup>61</sup> Such alternation plays out the relationship between Joe's need for Dorcas and his desertion by Wild in a narrative progression towards felicity.<sup>62</sup> As the voices of Joe and the narrator intersect the two stories of rejection move towards a shared resolution. For Joe pictures Dorcas accepting him back whilst the narrator imagines Wild's burrow as welcoming, entering it "was like falling into the sun" (183). These two different narrative threads are hence intertwined to form a textual epiphany, a moment of realisation that parallels Violet's reconciliation of herself and *that* Violet. Feeling secure in the space of his mother's home, Joe is no longer haunted by a sense of shame or abandonment, "Wild's chamber of gold ... [is] both snug and wide open", whilst his vision of Dorcas choosing

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<sup>60</sup> "It's not a thing you tell to another man. I know most men can't wait to tell each other about what they got going on the side ... They do it because the woman don't matter all that much ... I don't believe I could have told ... I couldn't tell myself because I didn't know all about it" (121).

<sup>61</sup> "Although it was a private place, with an opening closed to the public, once inside you could do what you pleased ... The color of the stone walls had changed from gold to fish-gill blue by the time he left. He had seen what there was" (184).

<sup>62</sup> At times slippage between the two figures takes place, for example Joe asserts that when he finds Dorcas "She'll be alone. Hardheaded. *Wild*, even. But alone" [my emphasis] (182).

“[n]obody but [him]” reveals understanding of her refusal to betray him as her attacker (184 & 221).<sup>63</sup> This construction thus brings about a form of closure as well as enacting fluidity.

The suggestion that both Violet and Joe come to comprehend better their double-consciousness, their tracks and cracks, is reinforced by the perspective of Felice. This friend of Dorcas’ narrates the ninth section of the novel, offering a view that revises earlier appraisals of the Traces. Felice perceives Joe as an honest and kindly man who, despite his search for self-endorsement, was sensitive to Dorcas’ feelings: “Nobody tried to love her before” (213). To Felice he is able to admit his own emotional dysfunction: “Why’d you shoot at her [?] ... Scared. Didn’t know how to love anybody” (213). By the end of *Jazz* Joe is described as appreciative of, and concerned for others.<sup>64</sup> He has gained maturity and is in a position to impart wisdom, offering Felice an affirmative legacy by telling her “[t]hey named you right. Remember that” (215). Felice’s narrative also offers a new perspective on Violet, claiming “[t]hey’re wrong ... there is nothing crazy about her at all” (202). The girl finds in her a model of integrity: “Nothing she says is a lie the way it is with most older people” (205). Indeed, Violet is now able to warn Felice that if you don’t change the world it will change you, “I let it. And messed up my life ... Forgot it was mine ... I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else ... White. Light. Young again” (208). Violet hence perceives and rejects the destructive elements of her experience.<sup>65</sup> She also presents a positive paradigm to Felice by asserting her *self*: “she said ‘me’. Like it was the first she heard of the word ... Not like the

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<sup>63</sup> Morrison has explained that her original inspiration for *Jazz* was a James Van Der Zee photograph of a young girl who died concealing the name of her lover / murderer. See James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson and Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (New York: Morgan & Morgan, 1978), pp.52-3 & p.84.

<sup>64</sup> Felice asserts, “[h]e has a way about him ... carries himself like he’s somebody. Like my father when he’s being a proud Pullman porter seeing the world ... But his eyes are not cold like my father’s ... *He has double eyes*. Each one a different color ... He looks at me and I feel deep – as though the things I feel and think are important and different and ... interesting” [my emphasis] (206). When Violet brought him a plate of food “[h]e said, ‘Thank you baby. Take half for yourself’. Something about the way he said it. As though he appreciated it. When my father says thanks, it’s just a word. Mr.Trace acted like he meant it” (207).

<sup>65</sup> As Ryan and Majozo identify, “[w]hen Violet recalls and examines the memories of her grandmother’s parenting, her rejection of the parts connected to the transference of the image of whiteness (via the stories of Golden Gray) which had destabilized her self image is as vital as her recollection of True Belle’s laughter (and the knowledge of its complexity and its transformative

'me' was some tough somebody, or somebody she had put together for show. But like, like somebody she favored and could count on ... somebody you didn't have to feel sorry for" (210). This signals the attainment of adulthood and a form of self-definition that departs the tracks laid by the City and quiets the ghosts of the past.

Through the Traces *Jazz* explores the difficulties of being both black and American, of inheriting the legacies of slavery, yet also the special dangers of a City that claims "History is over" (7). Their stories reveal "how you can end up out of control or controlled by some outside thing" (9). Life in New York causes alienation and disassociation, its own form of double-consciousness. It is only when Joe and Violet renegotiate their relationship to the Southern past and remember "what loving other people was like" that real self affirmation becomes possible (33). Morrison explains,

The city was seductive to them because it promised forgetfulness. It offered the possibility of freedom ... from history. But although history should not become a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must ... confront it and understand it in order to achieve a freedom that is more than license, to achieve true, adult agency.<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the novel the Traces have found a new way of living in the City. This is not to say that the complexities of their existences have disappeared, but rather that they have achieved a rootedness which allows them to be navigated. The author writes, "[i]f you penetrate the seduction of the city, then it becomes possible to confront your own history – to forget what ought to be forgotten and use what is useful – such is true agency made possible".<sup>67</sup> This instrumentality is associated with maturity and relates to Morrison's conception of the ancestor or elder as a nurturing and sustaining force. Indeed, the author observes that when this figure is missing devastation results.<sup>68</sup> In *Jazz* Violet and Joe lack communal

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capacity)". Ryan and Majozo, p.137. Certainly her warning aids Felice who understands "about having another you inside that isn't anything like you" (208).

<sup>66</sup> Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', p.114.

<sup>67</sup> Morrison, 'The Art of Fiction', p.114.

<sup>68</sup> Of black literature she writes, "[t]here is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom ... What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the

belonging and ancestral guidance in the North, yet, by the end of the narrative, discover adult agency and assume an advisory role themselves. They hence come to fulfil Felice's need for support as well as finding contentment with each other.

The Traces are depicted as reinventing their lives in the City to please themselves:

the day goes however they want it to ... They walk down 125<sup>th</sup> street and across Seventh Avenue and if they get tired they sit down and rest on any stoop ... and talk weather and youthful misbehaviour to the woman leaning on the sill of the first-floor window. Or they might saunter over to the Corner and join the crowd listening to the men with the long-distance eyes ... A lot of the time, though, they stay home figuring things out, telling each other those ... stories they like to hear again and again (223).

Joe and Violet hence spend their days as they wish, improvising their own tracks rather than following those laid by the City. They also reconnect with and share their pasts, no longer divided by traumatic memories. In fact they are bound together by their dreams and recollections: "joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from ports they never saw" (228).<sup>69</sup> Morrison's narrative signals the recapture of the Traces' love by describing a vivid scene of the South. An evening before their migration when Violet returned from the fields to "their little shotgun house", bathed and fell into "a safe sleep. Deep, trustworthy, feathered in colored dreams" and Joe, coming back after two months of work

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character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself". Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, ed. by Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1983), pp.339-345 (p.343). Elsewhere she observes, "The city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure. The country is beautiful – healing because more often than not, such an ancestor is there ... The wantonness described in much urban Black literature is really the wantonness of a character out of touch with the ancestor". Toni Morrison, 'City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction', in *Literature and the American Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, ed. by Michael C. Jaye and Ann C. Watts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), pp.35-43 (pp.39-40). The elder's is a "traditional role of advisor with a strong connection to the past ... For the ancestor is not only wise; he or she values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfilment". Morrison, 'City Limits', pp.40-43.

<sup>69</sup> The narrative of *Jazz* makes clear the intimacy of their reconnection: "Lying next to her, his head turned towards the window, he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly. Slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing. Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well" (224-5). Here Joe reflects on Dorcas, fatally wounded by him, and Wild's presence, signalled by redwings, whilst Violet remembers her mother's drowning.

away from home, found her there (see 225-6). This evocation is lyrical, tender and sensuous, conveying the intimacy of the young couple, their ease and sense of security together. Significantly this vision of the South, both nostalgic and hopeful following as it does the Traces' reconciliation, is accompanied by "the voices of the women in houses nearby singing 'Go down, go down, way down in Egypt land ...' Answering each other from yard to yard with a verse or its variation" (226). Such reference to the spirituals, to the forms of call and response that enabled the evolution of modern jazz, exemplifies how Morrison's exploration of the interrelation between past and present works. For here Southern notes echo through the City streets.

As Carolyn Denard observes, "Violet and Joe Trace finally are able to negotiate [the South] right there in Harlem".<sup>70</sup> Unlike Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, they do not have to go on a journey of immersion, but learn to be rooted, to recreate belonging and historical connection within the City. Indeed, the presence of Southern heritages in the North is figured repeatedly through the music brought to New York by black migration.<sup>71</sup> For example, the narrator's description of Harlem musicians conveys a poignant sense of the African American past:

You would have thought everything had been forgiven, the way they played ... the brass was cut so fine ... high and fine like a young girl swinging by the side of a creek ... The young men with brass probably never saw such a girl, or such a creek, but they made her up that day. On the rooftops ... So from Lenox to St. Nicholas and across 135<sup>th</sup> Street, Lexington, from Convent to Eighth I could hear the men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn't have a bucket to hold it and didn't want one either (196-7).

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<sup>70</sup> Denard in Morrison, 'Blacks, Modernism and the American South', p.16. Violet's re-evaluation of the South includes affirming a new affinity with the land. When Felice is dismissive and scornful of rural down home Violet asserts "it wasn't like that, looking at a bunch of trees. She said for me to go to 143rd street and look at the big one on the corner and see if it was a man or a woman or a child" (207-8).

<sup>71</sup> Gutmann suggests that it is music that provides connection back to the South throughout the text. See Katharina Gutmann, *Celebrating the Senses: An Analysis of the Sensual in Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2000), p.89. According to Morrison, black people in the 1920s and 30s "were still operating under the aegis, or umbrella, of a culture that had probably been reconfigured in the new world in the South. Most of the major themes and threats I think had originated there". Morrison, 'Blacks, Modernism and the American South', p.5.



Here jazz is associated with pastoral imagery that symbolises the South, but also artistic creativity arising from a “four-hundred-year” history.<sup>72</sup> The spontaneous musical expression is linked to the tapping of maples, a flow of syrup that runs free. And this outpouring, the imagery of gashed, bleeding trees, evokes a past of suffering and slavery (perhaps also suggesting an American landscape that bears the inscriptions of such oppression?). Certainly claims that the City is beyond or after history are countered as visions of down home and Northern streets coincide, as *Jazz* enacts connectivity and remembrance. Thus Violet and Joe finally overcome their deracination, learn to cope with “second-sight”, whilst the track and the crack are presented as, in the words of Carolyn Jones, “symbolic of the African diasporic experience and of how it has been and must be negotiated. African American experience is one of fracture, beginning with the middle passage and continuing through slavery and into the twentieth century. The African American past cannot be recovered whole and perfect; it must be reconstructed through following the traces, written in the face of the reality of the cracks”.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Previously such pastoral imagery was used to evoke what had been lost on leaving the South. For example, “[i]n no time at all [the migrant] forgets little pebbly creeks and apple trees so old they lay their branches on the ground ... He forgets a sun that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky ... the City is what they want it to be: thriftless, warm, scary, and full of amiable strangers. No wonder they forget pebbly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night” (34-5).

<sup>73</sup> DuBois, p.16. Carolyn M. Jones, ‘Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*’, *African American Review*, 31, 3 (1997), 481-495 (p.493).

## II. “A phantom ... to behold”: Orphanhood, Estrangement and Bodily Disruption

As established in Chapter Two, Toni Morrison frequently employs the damaged body as a means by which to describe the physical abuse endured by African Americans. Yet she also uses it to figure the devastating effects of cultural and communal estrangement, the fragmentation of families and the disruption of selfhood. The body thus becomes the image through which Morrison writes loss. In this part of my chapter I will interrogate the author's use of corporeal metaphors in *Jazz*, focusing primarily on her depiction of the orphanhood of Golden Gray. Struggling with the discovery of his illegitimacy and mixed racial origins, this character embarks on a journey by which he hopes to restore stability to his world. In a key passage his lack of a father due to the mechanisms of slavery is figured as a phantom limb, the felt absence left by amputation. I argue that in this portrayal Morrison refers to, and rewrites psychoanalytic discourses of ‘body image’, playing out notions of wholeness and unity, fragmentation and partiality. Indeed, when Golden Gray recognises what he has been missing, locating his parental limb “so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement”, I suggest that he achieves a realisation parallel to, but different from, the attainment of a coherent sense of self in the so-called mirror stage (159). The young man's confrontation with self image also involves a negotiation of his newly discovered blackness. Through his encounter with the mysterious character Wild, Morrison explores Golden Gray's conflictual experience of race, so recalling Fanon's discussion of black identity.<sup>74</sup>

The author's use of a phantom limb motif to convey familial dislocation and deracination is prefigured by several other depictions of bodily damage within *Jazz*. For example, the physical disability of Dorcas' childhood minder symbolises her emotional suffering. Neola was jilted by her “soon-to-be-groom”

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<sup>74</sup> Fanon's work, with its emphasis on *l'expérience vécue du Noir*, that is the lived experience of the Black, is useful to my investigation of how Morrison might employ psychoanalytic models. See Lewis R. Gordon, ‘The Black and the Body Politic: Fanon's Existential Phenomenological Critique of Psychoanalysis’, in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp.74-84.

and “[t]he pain of his refusal was visual, for over her heart, curled like a shell, was the hand on which he had positioned the ring. As though she held the broken pieces of her heart together in the crook of a frozen arm” (62). The woman’s paralysed limb, clutched towards her torso and heart, is the outward sign of her terrible loss. This corporeal manifestation of trauma heralds how Morrison will delineate Golden Gray’s severance from parental relations in terms of an amputated arm later in the text.<sup>75</sup>

Morrison’s preoccupation with generational isolation, specifically the trope of orphanhood, is central to *Jazz*. This form of displacement is shown to originate from slavery through the figure of True Belle, forced to move to Baltimore with her mistress and leave behind her own children. The pattern is then replicated among the descendents of slaves as most of the novel’s characters were cut off from either one or both parents at a young age. Dorcas was raised by an aunt after her mother and father were killed in the 1917 East St. Louis race riots. Felice was cared for by her grandmother whilst her parents worked away from home throughout her childhood. And both Joe and Violet Trace were orphaned. It is, however, the familial dislocation of Golden Gray, graphically figured in terms of body image, that I will focus on here.<sup>76</sup>

Born to a Southern belle and the male slave with whom she conducted a secret affair, Golden Gray is of mixed race. His very existence and distinctive physicality signify the transgression of prohibitions about interracial contact

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<sup>75</sup> Morrison also makes reference to the dismembered corporeality of First World War veterans: “Armistice was seven years old ... and veterans on Seventh Avenue were still wearing their army-issue greatcoats, because nothing they can pay for is as sturdy or *hides so well what they had boasted of in 1919*” [my emphasis] (9-10). And a street musician, a “Blacktherefore blue man”, is pictured as an amputee: “The singer is hard to miss, sitting as he does on a fruit crate in the center of the sidewalk. His peg leg is stretched out comfy; his real one is carrying both the beat and the guitar’s weight” (119). The significance of body image in *Jazz* is, in addition, anticipated by earlier texts. In the author’s second novel, *Sula*, the character of Eva Peace defines herself using her amputated limb. Not only is Eva rumoured to have deliberately sacrificed her leg in order to gain the insurance money needed to support her family, but after the ‘accident’ she declines to hide her disfigurement, instead drawing attention to her asymmetrical body, signifying on the missing limb in her storytelling and apparently gaining power from its mystery, from her own physical difference (See 30-31). As explored in Chapter Two, the trope of dismemberment is also developed in Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved*.

<sup>76</sup> As Hardack points out in discussion of Morrison’s work, “[a]ll orphans are kinds of amputees, cut off from parents, and blacks dispossessed of an integrated identity and often of family by slavery and its after-effects, are imagined as prototypical orphans”. Hardack, p.466.

deeply embedded in the system of slavery. Indeed, his mother, Miss Vera Louise Gray, was disowned by her father for, although the Colonel had “seven mulatto children on his land” (presumably the result of his own relations with female slaves), it was unthinkable to him that a white woman (as the inviolate icon of Southern purity) should choose to have intercourse with a black man (141). Golden Gray was hence raised in Baltimore, exiled from the family home and kept ignorant of his parentage. Vera Louise’s unorthodox household in the city may have had a “renegade, almost suffragette” reputation, yet she concealed her son’s origins for fear of public condemnation (139). Throughout his boyhood she “passed anxious looks at the palms of his hand, the texture of his drying hair”, never telling him whether she was “his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor” (143-9). Because he was not informed to the contrary until the age of eighteen, Golden Gray grew up believing himself to be white, internalising the assumptions which accompanied that status in Nineteenth Century American society. His story exemplifies how families (both black and white) were rent apart by slavery, how lineage and hence a sense of belonging were disrupted.<sup>77</sup>

As a boy, Golden Gray was pampered by both his mother and her slave, their idolisation fostering in him vanity and arrogance: “True Belle ... laughing, fed him test cakes and picked every single seed from the melon before she let him eat it. Vera Louise dressed him like the Prince of Wales and read him vivid stories” (140). His privileged life as a “gentleman”, however, fell apart when Vera Louise finally told him that “his father was a black-skinned nigger” (142-3). This revelation of miscegenation, and therefore necessarily illegitimacy, threw his world into disarray: “It ... rocked him when he heard who and what his father was. Made him loose, lost. He had first fingered then torn some of his mother’s clothes and sat down in the grass looking at things scattered on the lawn as well as in his mind” (159). Golden Gray’s experience of dissolution, of estrangement, is suggestive of Frantz Fanon’s description of realising the fact of his blackness in a white world. This traumatic discovery brought about by

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<sup>77</sup> True Belle, forced to accompany Vera Louise into exile despite having a husband and two young daughters in Vesper County, also experienced traumatic displacement: “True Belle was the one she wanted and the one she took” (141). According to Grewal, “[i]n giving the name True Belle to the black woman, Morrison calls attention to the very different relationships black and

contact with whites relates to double-consciousness, or what he terms, the black man's "massive psychoexistential complex".<sup>78</sup> Yet whilst Fanon underwent disassociation and disruption when his prior assumption of humanness was assaulted, Morrison's character is destabilised by the shattering of a prior assumption of whiteness, in part founded on his light skinned appearance: "He had always thought there was only one kind – True Belle's kind. Black and nothing ... But there was another kind - like himself" (149). Learning of his racial origins leads Golden Gray to apprehend his body as a physical sign of miscegenation and to question his mother's attitude towards it: she "would have regretted [her] baby ... given it away, except it was golden and she had never seen that color except in the morning sky" (148). Such ambivalent maternity augments his sense of unbelonging.<sup>79</sup>

Following the revelation of his parentage, directed by True Belle, Golden Gray set out to locate Henry Lestory. For, still unaccepting of his black lineage, he sought to confront the ex-slave who slept with his white mother, "to find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father" (143). This mission signals his deep confusion and anxiety about race. On his journey he "worried ... about what he looked like, what armor he could call on", such insecurity perhaps indicating the beginnings of double-consciousness (160).<sup>80</sup> Fearing being found a "nigger", he tried to bolster himself with extravagant clothing, an expensive horse, the trappings of a Southern gentleman (149).<sup>81</sup> Golden Gray's ensuing encounter with Wild, however, alters the terms on which he meets Lestory. Indeed, it proves crucial to his developing sense of himself as black. Travelling through

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white women had to antebellum southern patriarchy and to the power differential between a mistress and her slave". Grewal, p.130.

<sup>78</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.12.

<sup>79</sup> "[H]is flesh was radiantly golden, and floppy yellow curls covered his head ... [this] sunlight color ... endeared him" (139). So "they named him ... and didn't take him to the Catholic Foundling Hospital, where white girls deposited their mortification" (148).

<sup>80</sup> He told himself "[c]arry yourself the way you would if you were always under the reviewing eye of an impressionable but casual acquaintance" (153). According to the narrator, "[n]o one is looking at him, but he behaves as though there is" (153). Reference to such an outside gaze implies a "sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" as delineated by DuBois. DuBois, pp.16-17.

<sup>81</sup> The narrator envisages him "in a two-seat phaeton. His horse is a fine one – black. Strapped to the back of the carriage is his trunk: large and crammed with beautiful shirts, linen, and embroidered sheets and pillow slips; a cigar case and silver toilet articles. A long coat, vanilla colored with dark brown cuffs and collar" (143).

the rural South, he startles a “berry black woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible” (144). The orphan is surprised by this “vision” of a naked figure in the forest and disturbed by the meeting of their gazes (144). The pregnant woman, scared by what she assumes is a white man, knocks herself unconscious as she flees. Golden Gray’s reaction, one of repulsion, enables Morrison to explore his conflictual and prejudiced conceptions of racial identity.

Rather than feeling compassion for a fellow human being, Golden Gray fears that the unclothed, dirty and “sprawled” black creature might contaminate him (144). On approaching her “[h]e ... hold[s] his breath against infection or odor or something ... that might touch or penetrate him” (144). Indeed, he perceives Wild as potentially pollutant, as a thing so alien to him that she has no recognisable selfhood. Carrying her to his carriage, he regrets the touch of “dirty bare feet against his boot” and he later drives gently “for fear the ruts and the muddy road will cause her to fall forward or brush him in some way” (145). The repugnance with which he treats the woman reveals his anxiety about being tarnished by her blackness and apparent savagery, something which relates to the recent revelations about his personal history. At her wildness and darkness, Golden Gray feels “nausea”, a sensation reminiscent of the “shame and self-contempt” experienced by Fanon on realising his own blackness (144).<sup>82</sup> This is a parallel to which I will return later.

Golden Gray’s reluctant rescue of Wild demonstrates his callousness, but also exposes the mixed motivations of his search for Lestory. He wishes to confront his father, indeed, kill him, so exorcising his shameful paternity, yet also to impress, to earn approbation. The black woman hence becomes a prop to take with him, proving his honourable nature.<sup>83</sup> “[H]e thinks it is an interesting, even

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<sup>82</sup> “[N]oticing that his horse is also black, naked and shiny wet ... [i]t occurs to him that there is something odd about that; the pride he takes in his horse; the *nausea* the woman provoked” [my emphasis] (144). See Fanon, p.116. In his reference to nausea Fanon draws on, and reworks the ideas of Sartre.

<sup>83</sup> He crafts “a story ... to tell ... [h]ow he was driving along, saw and saved this wild black girl ... He’s young ... He thinks his story is wonderful, and that if spoken right will impress his father with his willingness, his honor ... He wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant” (154).

comic idea to meet this nigger whom he has never seen (and who has never tried to see him)" accompanied by her (145). Yet he fears "that she might regain consciousness and become something more than his own dark purpose" (145-6). This worry reveals Golden Gray's need to see Wild as an object, not a thinking, feeling subject who might disrupt his plans or even alter his own sense of self. His intention to use her in his forthcoming encounter will be jeopardised if she opens her eyes. Only whilst she remains inert, insentient, entirely unknown, is he free to project onto her what he wishes.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the young man's view of the woman is central to his definition of himself: "the awful-looking thing ... was everything he was not as well as proper protection against and anodyne to what he believed his father to be, and therefore (if it could just be contained, identified) – himself" (149).<sup>85</sup> She is naked, female, wild and berry black, he is immaculately clothed, male, 'civilised' and has pale, golden skin. In contrasting himself with, placing himself next to, Wild, Golden Gray believes that he has found a way to manage the blackness that he fears, the blackness of his father and therefore also the blackness within himself. Drawing on the assumptions of his previous 'whiteness', he is able to dissociate himself from her otherness.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> This kind of denial of subjectivity is discussed by Lewis Gordon: "The black body lives in an anti black world as a form of absence of human presence ... In order to see the black as a thing requires the invisibility of a black's perspective". Lewis R. Gordon, 'Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility', in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.69-79 (pp.72-3). Such issues are famously explored in Ellison's Prologue to *Invisible Man*: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me ... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination ... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact". Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p.3.

<sup>85</sup> Visions of Wild as a primitive and / or exotic other are reminiscent of Morrison's discussion of the role served by Africanist presences in white-authored American Literature. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), p.38.

<sup>86</sup> Schwartz's discussion of Pecola's solution to what she sees as the problem of her blackness in *The Bluest Eye* might be relevant here. "[I]f one can look at the world as a white person, that individual has no need to look at oneself. One then turns away from the problem and pain and does not consider oneself as black because as a white seeing a black the latter is seen as of no consequence. To see as a white person is to be as a white person". Gary Schwartz, 'Toni Morrison at the Movies: Theorizing Race Through Imitation of Life', in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.111-128 (p.118). At the same time that Golden Gray perceives Wild as other, he realises she "look[s] also like home comfortable enough to wallow in" (150). For although he sees her "leafy hair" and "unfathomable skin" as alien, "two gallops beyond that hair, that skin, their absence was unthinkable" (150). Indeed, Wild's physicality evokes Golden Gray's "first and major love", True Belle (150). The contradictions of his relation to blackness (both familiar and foreign) are thus indicated. Although raised and adored by a black woman he cannot, however, yet recognise one as an equal.

Golden Gray's reaction to the contact with Wild that his rescue necessitates stems, in part, from a sense of the female body as dangerous. He is disconcerted, referring to "not looking to see what he could see of her private parts, the shock of knowing the hair there" (152).

Everything about her is violent, or seems so, but that is because she is exposed ... and there is nothing to prevent Golden Gray from believing that an exposed woman will explode in his arms, or worse, that he will, in hers. She should be ... [s]titched shut to hide her visible lumps and moving parts (153).

He finds the very evident corporeality of Wild disturbing, wishing it concealed, closed. He describes her as an "armful of black liquid female", a threatening sexual other lacking clearly defined boundaries, difficult to contain (145). The drama or violence that he perceives in her physical presence also, however, signals his attraction to her. For the possibility of him exploding in the arms of a girl with "lips to break your heart" is surely a sexualised one (155). Both his repulsion at, and his desire for Wild delineate a lack of safety, the potential she has to destroy his known world.

Golden Gray's relation to Wild is perhaps most effectively explored through his inability to confront her gaze:

He tried not to look at ... her face ... Already he had seen the deer eyes that fixed on him through the rain ... fixed on him as her body began to turn for flight ... when he went back for her he ... believed, hoped, the deer eyes would be closed. Suddenly he was not sure of himself. They might be open. His gratitude that they were not gave him the strength he needed to lift her (152-3).

On first encountering Wild, Golden Gray is afraid to meet her eyes, to truly face up to this 'other' being exposed before him. He thus fears having to recognise her as a subject, as an equal, rather than dismissing her as an animal, even prey. "If she should rise up and claw him it would satisfy him even more" as he wants, needs to see her as savage and bestial (155).<sup>87</sup> Here Morrison creates a

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<sup>87</sup> This desire is tied up with his avoidance of her gaze, his refusal of reciprocal acknowledgement. Gordon writes, "to reject the Other as a perspective from which we are constituted as Other is an effort to evade our own experience; in short, it is a form of bad faith". Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.48-9. Yet the narrator asks, "who would see her, a



confrontation that recalls, yet revises Fanon's description of realising his blackness. Fanon writes, "the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes ... Nausea ... I discovered my blackness ... and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism ... I took myself far off from my own presence ... and made myself an object"<sup>88</sup> He investigates how the projections of the white oppressor, what Morrison in her essays terms American Africanisms, are internalised by the black man, how in "the white world" the black man's sense of his body, his "corporeal schema", is disrupted by "a racial epidermal schema" woven from dominant cultural mythologies.<sup>89</sup> Whilst it is the "external stimulus" of a white gaze that causes Fanon to experience himself "in the third person", Golden Gray faces a black woman, defining his own subjectivity in opposition to her difference.<sup>90</sup> Seeing Wild with white eyes, Morrison's character perceives her as an object, his newly discovered black paternity shaping his need to distance himself and raising troubling questions about his relation to her. During the course of his encounter, however, his attitude changes and eventually he thinks himself "ready for those deer eyes to open" (162). This willingness to confront what he previously couldn't may signal a coming to terms with what Wild represents (chiefly blackness itself, but also female and therefore dangerous sexuality). Finally able to meet the terrible eyes of the black woman, to recognise her as a subject like himself, Golden Gray it is suggested no longer thinks or sees like a white man: "He thought she would be his lance and shield; now he would have to be his own. Look into the deer

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playful woman who lived in a rock? Who could, without fright? Of her looking eyes looking back?" (221).

<sup>88</sup> Fanon, pp.110-12. This episode is detailed more fully thus: "the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me ... In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness ... Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me ... by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories ... 'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by ... Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema ... it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person ... I existed triply ... I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'. On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence ... and made myself an object". Fanon, pp.110-112.

<sup>89</sup> Fanon, pp.110-112. See Morrison, *Playing*, p.6.

<sup>90</sup> Fanon, pp.111-112.

eyes with the dawning gray of his own" (160). Such "dawning" seems to indicate hope and the attainment of new awareness. Unlike Fanon's experience of objectification, this revelation is affirmative, not a negation, but a realisation of self.

Certainly Golden Gray's encounter with the wild woman influences his ensuing meeting with Lestory. It initiates a process of coming to accept his black lineage, indeed, according to the narrator, "it must have been the girl who changed his mind" about killing his father (173).<sup>91</sup> Although the text leaves ambiguous how matters between Golden Gray and Wild were concluded, Lestory's narrative claims that she "set ... much store by" his son, indicating that their relationship must have evolved in some way (168). His vision of them side by side contrasts with earlier opposition and hierarchy: "To see them together was a regular jolt: the young man's head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool" (167).

Golden Gray's visit to the home of his father, "the blackest man in the world", engenders another realisation, this time of orphanhood (157). Here the narrative shifts to his own first person voice which uses a graphic bodily metaphor of dismemberment and partiality to describe his experience:

Only now ... that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence: the place where he should have been and was not. Before, I thought everybody was one-armed,

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<sup>91</sup> Lestory's own narrative of meeting Golden Gray recalls both Fanon's and Sartre's explorations of racial identity. He tells his son "[l]ook. Be what you want – white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up – quicklike" (173). This advice echoes Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew* where he writes, "Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself as Jew – that is, in realizing one's Jewish condition. The authentic Jew ... ceases to run away from himself and to be ashamed of his own kind". Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. by George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p.136. Lestory's association of racial identity and manhood is similar to Fanon's: "I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN". Fanon, p.115. Both theorists emphasise the need to affirm, to choose racial identity, a lesson Golden Gray learns when he sheds his white gaze in order to face up to Wild. His previous inauthenticity (in Sartre's sense) is hinted at through the narrative's reference to "his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures" (155). Fanon writes of his blackness "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave ... of my own appearance". Fanon, p.116. Golden Gray's position, however, is slightly different, perhaps corresponding more closely to that of the 'inauthentic' Jew as described by Sartre? "With him anxiety often takes a special form; it becomes a fear of acting or feeling like a Jew ... They have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype ... we may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside". Sartre, p.95.

like me. Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the sliced flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the blood run and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe. Singing pain. Waking me with the sound of itself (158).

Golden Gray perceives his parental lack as a missing limb, an absence felt only on learning of Lestory's existence. The hurt and dislocation that he experiences on realising this loss is figured through vivid imagery of amputation. The severed nerves and blood vessels also suggest, however, the disruption of genealogical (and therefore racial) lineage caused by slavery. The orphan sees himself as incomplete, his paternal 'arm' as an absent presence that causes singing pain.<sup>92</sup> This metaphor recalls once more the writings of Frantz Fanon who pictured the alienation felt on discovering his blackness in terms of dismemberment: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?"<sup>93</sup> Morrison's novel, however, uses such a figure to convey the suffering of familial displacement rather than that of racial negation.

The way in which Golden Gray describes his lack, his separation from his father, also evokes Jacques Lacan's discussion of phantom limbs. In 'Some Reflections on the Ego' the psychoanalyst poses a psychical projection or perceptual mapping of the corporeal as key to the formation of a sense of self. This "body image" or "imaginary Anatomy" is revealed in the physically inexplicable experience of a "phantom limb".<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Grosz explains, "[t]o illustrate the existence of an autonomous body-schema, Lacan cites the phenomena of the phantom limb ... The limb that has been surgically removed continues to induce sensations of pain in the area where it used to be. While this pain cannot be located in the 'real' anatomy of the body, it inhabits the space occupied by the imaginary body ... The phantom limb is a symptom of mourning

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<sup>92</sup> The phrase absent presence is Rubenstein's who writes of loss in *Jazz* "individuals experience it not merely as absence – something missing – but as a lack that continues to occupy a palpable emotional space: the presence of absence". Rubenstein, 'Singing the blues', p.150. This can also be witnessed in Joe's sense of being haunted by Wild.

<sup>93</sup> Fanon, p.112.

<sup>94</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Some Reflections on the Ego', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34 (1953), 11-17 (p.13).

for the lost bodily totality”.<sup>95</sup> Just as pain is felt by a patient in the place once occupied by an amputated arm for example, so in *Jazz* the son feels the hurt of being an orphan “where [his father] should have been and was not” (158). The imagery that Golden Gray employs recalls Lacan’s discussion of distorted corporeal schemas and anxieties about fragmentation, yet although his experience is one of dissolution, the character is not symbolically expressing hysteria along the psychoanalyst’s lines, but rather finding in the body a way to visualise or articulate personal loss. His formulation of an imaginary anatomy allows him to figure familial dismemberment, to recognise his orphanhood as a deprivation, rethinking previous rage and confusion.

Significantly Golden Gray is brought to this awareness of lack by confronting the sight of his laid out clothes.<sup>96</sup> Beholding a vision that reveals himself incomplete, he weeps, but also begins to comprehend his identity anew. For “the arrangement, lying on the bed, looked like *an empty man with one arm folded under*” [my emphasis] (158). This moment of realisation perhaps in some ways refers to the Mirror Stage mapped out by Lacan.<sup>97</sup> However, instead of seeing an autonomous and whole body image and so forming an affirmative sense of self, the orphan in *Jazz* perceives a corporeal schema of partiality and insubstantiality. His reflection does not prompt assured self-recognition founded on specular anatomical coherence, but rather permits an understanding of incompleteness. Morrison’s text hence revises Lacan’s narrative of infant development to explore the effects of slavery’s dislocation. Experiencing bodily deficiency is here linked to a missing parent, to being deprived of a familial limb, not a fear of losing selfhood and lapsing into discord. Indeed, Golden Gray does not deny partiality, but discovers who he is through it.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.44.

<sup>96</sup> Preparing to meet his father, he plans to change into his “yellow shirt, the trousers with buttons of bone in the fly, the butter-colored waistcoat” (158).

<sup>97</sup> According to Lacan, the child experiences the Mirror Stage as an affirmative discernment of self in a complete body image, so forming a psychic / libidinal map of the body. He writes, “we cannot fail to appreciate the affective value which the gestalt of the vision of the whole body-image may assume when we consider the fact that it appears against a background of organic disturbance and discord”. Lacan, p.15. The child still experiences its body as lacking in cohesion, yet “[t]he ego illusorily sees itself as autonomous and self-determined, independent of otherness”. Grosz, p.43.

<sup>98</sup> Perhaps the disturbance felt here, along with that caused by the encounter with Wild, is even Morrison’s attempt to explore a suggestion made by Fanon in a footnote to *Black Skin, White*

The young man turns towards his “surgery”, seeking to probe his lack of a father:

Let the dangle and the writhe see what it is missing ... I am not going to be healed, or to find the arm that was removed from me. I am going to freshen the pain, point it, so we both know what it is for ... I don't need the arm. But I do need to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a phantom I have to behold and be held by (158).

Golden Gray wishes to inhabit the agonised space of his amputated limb. He wants to explore the sensation and the nature of his depletion, to investigate what he has lost and perhaps to grope for where he might have belonged. This ambition represents not a yearning for completion, but rather a brave effort to understand his wound.<sup>99</sup> He extends the metaphor of the phantom limb to conceive of what he has missed by not having had a father: “This gone-away hand that never helped me over the stile ... pulled me up from the ditch into which I stumbled. Stroked my hair, fed me food ... This arm that never held itself out, extended from my body, to give me balance as I walked ... logs, round and slippery with danger” (158-9). Without paternal guidance, support and affection, Golden Gray has been lacking, imbalanced, disabled. The deprivations described by him perhaps also suggest that his father might too have been deficient? Indeed, he wonders if Lestory will acknowledge him, if the arm will “[g]esture, beckon to [him] to come along?” (159). Most important to him, however, is the dismemberment itself: “I will locate [the limb] so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement” (159). He seeks not healing, but to trace his loss.

Following his encounter with Wild and realisation of the devastation of orphanage, Golden Gray's attitude towards his father changes significantly. His

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*Masks*: “It would indeed be interesting, on the basis of Lacan's theory of the *mirror period*, to investigate the extent to which the *imago* of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro”? Fanon, p.161.

<sup>99</sup> Unlike Lacan's child who denies experiences of the body in fragments, privileging the complete image revealed in the mirror, Golden Gray does not wish his partial state to be made whole, rather he focuses on the pain of severance. McKee writes, “this is a missing history, an imagination of what might have been. There is nothing to be recovered but the pain of the separation, the only physical evidence of the missing part”. Patricia McKee, *Producing*

mission no longer appears to be murder, but rather forging a new sense of identity and belonging for himself.<sup>100</sup> In particular, he seeks to be absolved of his previous reaction, wondering if Lestory will be able to “[s]oap away the shame” (159). The distress and pain of familial dislocation replace anger and anxiety about race:

What do I care what the color of his skin is, or his contact with my mother?  
When I see him, or what is left of him, I will tell him all about the missing part  
of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine  
and take his as my own and we will both be free (159).

The son here envisages sharing his lack with his father, in fact attaining a kind of liberation by swapping experiences of deprivation. He hopes for a reunion at which the two of them will become “arm-tangled” (159). This image of entwinement implies neither separation nor merger; Golden Gray and Henry Lestory will be bound to each other by depletion, together finding balance, beholding and being held by their respective phantom limbs. Although he set out to challenge “the black and savage man who ... abused his arm”, the orphan’s journey becomes one of re-membering loss and coming to terms with blackness (160). In probing the pain of his amputation, he imagines his father to be similarly haunted, so ceasing to blame him. His new sense of purpose arises from confronting his partiality and presumably finally meeting the eyes of Wild. Although the narrative leaves unclear the outcome of his meeting with Lestory, it is certain that he no longer seeks to resolve his crisis through patricide. Here, as Rubenstein observes, “Morrison reprises an idea that appears throughout her fiction: the imagery of dismemberment as a trope for the incalculable damages inflicted on African-Americans by slavery and its devastating aftermath”.<sup>101</sup> *Jazz*, however, develops this corporeal metaphor to figure orphanage using the phenomenon of a phantom limb.

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*American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.184.

<sup>100</sup> The narrative makes reference to “the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin ... But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place” (160).

<sup>101</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, ‘History and Story, Sign and Design: Faulknerian and Postmodern Voices in *Jazz*’, in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.152-164 (p.158).

It is worth noting that Golden Gray's vision of a "missing part" bears some relation to another of the novel's depictions of familial dislocation (159). For Joe Trace is a fellow orphan hunting for an absent parent, searching the Southern forests for Wild, seeking some acknowledgment of her maternity. When he calls to her to stick her arm out from the undergrowth, he, like Lestry's son, hopes for a "[g]esture" indicating belonging (159). Indeed, Joe's request for "a sign, her *hand thrust through the leaves* ... to say that she knew him to be the one, the son she had ... and ran away from", echoes Golden Gray's conviction that he must locate his phantom limb "in whatever crevice it lies, *under whatever branch*" [my emphasis] (37 & 158). This parallel reveals the successive displacements experienced by generations of African Americans.

The searches of Joe Trace and Golden Gray for missing parental figures recall William Faulkner's treatment of Southern genealogy and miscegenation. In particular Charles Bon, a mixed race character from *Absalom! Absalom!*, is evoked. As Philip Weinstein observes, Golden Gray and Charles Bon are both "abandoned sons in search of their paternal origins".<sup>102</sup> Yet Bon desperately seeks acknowledgment from the white patriarch Thomas Sutpen whilst Gray sets out to challenge his black father.<sup>103</sup> John Duvall writes, "[i]n *Absalom*, Faulkner creates a complicated genealogy, where bloodlines are crossed and re-crossed to the point that the very rationale of the white Southern community is continuously threatened. But the moments of miscegenation in *Absalom* always occur when black ... women have children by white fathers".<sup>104</sup> Faulkner obscures such transgressions for much of his narrative, delaying their inevitable revelation, but he also "tease[s] out ... the cultural horror of his ... community" by raising the

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<sup>102</sup> Philip M. Weinstein, *What Else But Love?: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.145. Rubenstein elaborates, "[b]oth Bon and ... Gray are effeminate, light-skinned mulattoes; each illegitimate and defined by the radical absence of the father who rejected or deserted him, is haunted by the wish to be emotionally legitimised by that father". Rubenstein, 'History and Story', p.157.

<sup>103</sup> Bon is imagined pleading, "[h]e would just have to write 'I am your father. Burn this' and I would do it. Or if not that, a sheet a scrap of paper with the one word 'Charles' in his hand, and I would know what he meant ... Or a lock of his hair or a paring from his finger nail and I would know them ... That would be a sign". William Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1986), p.261.

<sup>104</sup> John N. Duvall, 'Toni Morrison and the Anxiety of Faulknerian Influence', in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross and Judith Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.3-16 (p.13).

spectre “what if a black man slept with a white woman”.<sup>105</sup> Morrison fulfils this possibility through the story of Golden Gray, so reworking the earlier formulation. Hence the white patriarch is dethroned for Colonel Wordsworth Gray is helpless to undo his daughter’s wilful ‘pollution’ and the figure of the mulatto seeks paternal acknowledgment from a black man and ex-slave. If in *Absalom! Absalom!* “sonship registers ... as a gaping wound in being itself, one that only the father’s recognition can cure”, then surely in *Jazz* Morrison develops the metaphor of this wound into an aesthetic of dismemberment conveying African American familial dislocation?<sup>106</sup>

Lastly, the figure of Golden Gray also has significance within the construction of *Jazz*, operating as a narrative hinge or lynchpin. For the son of Vera Louise and Hunter’s Hunter forms the connective tissue that links the two stories of Violet and Joe Trace. Despite their marriage of over twenty years, neither Joe nor Violet is aware that their family pasts were inextricably entwined.<sup>107</sup> Hence Golden Gray has to work as a bridge, an axis upon which the central narratives of the novel can turn. He is thus pivotal to both the themes and the composition of *Jazz*.

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<sup>105</sup> Duvall, ‘Toni Morrison and the Anxiety of Faulknerian Influence’, p.13.

<sup>106</sup> Weinstein, p.146.

<sup>107</sup> Joe’s birth in Lestory’s home followed promptly Gray’s rescue of Wild, whilst Violet’s grandmother, True Belle, was the slave who helped Vera Louise to raise her golden son. As a consequence Violet grew up hearing about an adored blonde child and Joe was trained by Hunter’s Hunter.



### III. The Trope of the Talking Book

In this final part of my analysis of *Jazz* I turn to the significance of the novel's unusual and unnamed first person narrator, arguing that Morrison's construction deliberately alludes to, and places itself within, a black literary tradition concerned with tropes of orality and literacy. The narrative voice of *Jazz* is difficult to identify or classify, the main reason for this being its unattributed source. Morrison has offered clues to her referent, the Talking Book, in interview, yet so far no one has attempted to trace the complex invocation of it throughout the text, nor read this as part of the tradition of signification proposed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.<sup>108</sup> This then is the aim of my project here. In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates sets forth the practice of Signifyin(g) as a distinctive feature of African American writing.<sup>109</sup> To exemplify this theory he explores the use made of a trope that he terms the Talking Book in black narratives of the late Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Century. Indeed, Gates finds tropological revision (the repetition of a specific trope with differences) to allow the identification of an early black literary tradition. Indebted to this analysis, I suggest that *Jazz* operates as a further link in such a chain of signification, so situating itself within a longstanding black Atlantic nexus of influence.<sup>110</sup>

The particular evolution of the Talking Book trope relates to the issue of literacy, key to narrative attempts by slaves and ex-slaves to prove their humanity, subjectivity and intellect.<sup>111</sup> It is in the need to position themselves as

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<sup>108</sup> Several critics have linked *Jazz* with the phrase 'talking book', but none have developed this line of enquiry. See, for example, Nancy J. Peterson, "'Say make me, remake me': Toni Morrison and the Reconstruction of African-American History", in *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*, ed. by Nancy J. Peterson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.201-221 (p.216).

<sup>109</sup> His central thesis is that "the relations of significance that obtain between and among black texts serve as a basis for a theory of formal revision in the Afro-American tradition". Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.xxvii.

<sup>110</sup> Finding "[t]he literature of the slave, published in English between 1760 and 1865 ... the most obvious site to excavate the origins of the Afro-American literary tradition", Gates claims that common patterns of representation arise to some extent from "the shared sense of a common experience" but also that "shared modes of figuration result ... when writers read each other's texts and seize upon topoi and tropes to revise in their own texts". Gates, *Signifying*, pp.127-8. He writes, "[o]ur narrators, our signifiers, are links in an extended ebony chain of discourse". Gates, *Signifying*, p.256. It is here that a place may be found for *Jazz*.

<sup>111</sup> "The production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could, or could not, establish and redefine their status within the human community.

articulate and / or literate that the impetus for early black writers' use of the trope can be found. For such authors sought to emphasise their capacity for learning, to depict themselves in acts of textual interpretation or composition. In the standard Talking Book narrative (much varied upon as Gates illustrates) an illiterate male slave sees and hears his master or another white figure of authority reading aloud from a printed text (usually a bible or prayer book). Believing that the book itself talks, he too wishes to converse with it, yet to him it refuses to speak (even when he puts an ear to the page). This experience is typically described within a publication by an ex-slave who has since stolen, or been blessed with the power of literacy. The trope uses humour to establish the author's former ignorance, but also cleverly demonstrates his ability to master the written word once given the opportunity. Gates surveys the occurrence of this tale in several texts, exploring permutations in the dynamics of power along lines of race and sex as well as varying polemical motivations. The trope raises a complex set of concerns which include education (and its restriction), the word of the Christian God,<sup>112</sup> 'civilisation', intellect, authority and voicing. It is also suggestive in terms of more recent figurations of orality within black literature, a point to which I will return.<sup>113</sup>

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Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture". Gates, *Signifying*, p.129.

<sup>112</sup> Morrison's epigraph to *Jazz* is taken from a part of the early Gnostic writings, the Nag Hammadi codices, discovered in Egypt in 1945. Whilst some critics have identified similarities between the unnamed narrative voice of her novel and that of 'Thunder, Perfect Mind' (see Philip Page, *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), p.176), the reference to "an extraordinary poem spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power" might also be a response to the investment of early revisionists of the Talking Book trope in the word of a patriarchal Christian God? Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p.xvii. The epigraph, in addition, has significance in terms of the concerns of the trope. "I am the ... sound of the name" appears to indicate orality / aurality, whilst "I am the sign of the letter" seems to allude to written discourse. Might *Jazz*'s voicing then be "the designation of the division", the negotiation of both modes? A later line from 'Thunder, Perfect Mind', "I am the speech that cannot be grasped", is surely pertinent to the elusiveness of Morrison's creation? *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. by James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), pp.297-303.

<sup>113</sup> Gates writes, "[t]he trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition ... making the white written text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced ... explication ... reveals, rather surprisingly, that the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self". Gates, *Signifying*, p.131. He first examines *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (published in 1770), writing "[t]he book

When Morrison signifies on the trope of the Talking Book, I propose that she deliberately inserts *Jazz* into a literary tradition preoccupied with both oral and written modes of discourse. On widening his study to include the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker, Gates wonders “how a rhetorical strategy could possibly extend ... the notions of voice at play in these major texts of the black tradition”.<sup>114</sup> Yet this seemingly impossible task of furthering, revising again the quest to make “the white written text speak with a black voice” is exactly what I suggest that *Jazz* fulfils.<sup>115</sup> Morrison invokes the trope in a manner quite different to all of its previous interpreters. Her novel does not feature a particular Talking Book episode or scene, yet makes explicit reference to the motif through its distinctive and mysterious first person narrative voice, itself positioned as that of a Talking Book.

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had no voice for Gronniosaw; it simply refused to speak to him, or with him ... The text does not recognise his presence, and so refuses to share its secrets or decipher its coded message ... the ‘dialogue’ that he records having observed between the book and his master eludes him”. Later “[t]his desire for recognition of his self in the text of Western letters motivates Gronniosaw’s creation of a text”, his autobiography. Gates, *Signifying*, pp.136-7. Gates next turns to *The Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (published in 1785), considering how this captivity tale reworks Gronniosaw’s trope of the (non-) talking book: “Marrant’s revision inaugurates the black tradition of English literature, not because he was its first author but because he was the tradition’s first revisionist”. Gates, *Signifying*, p.145. He also discusses Ottobah Cuguoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* (published in 1787), a narrative that uses the trope of the text that speaks to explore the treachery of Spanish conquistador, Pizarro, towards Atahualpa and the Incas. By bracketing it in a tale within a tale, Cugoano “calls attention to the figurative nature of the trope itself instead of drawing upon it as an element in [the] primary narrative line”. Gates, *Signifying*, p.151. Central to Gates’ thesis is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (published in 1789) which aligns the journey to freedom with the journey to literacy and employs complex rhetorical strategies to create a ‘text of becoming’. Using, among other devices, a Talking Book episode, Equiano contrasts his earlier self with the self that narrates his narrative, at the same time pointing towards the objectification implicit in Western culture: “When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak ... Through the act of writing alone, Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject”. Gates, *Signifying*, p.156. The early Nineteenth Century slave autobiography, *The Life, History and Unparalleled Suffering of John Jea* (rediscovered only in 1983), describes a miracle of literacy, divine intervention enabling communion with the word of God and thereby bringing about the author’s manumission. According to Gates, “Jea’s revision also tells us that the trope, all along, has been one of presence, the presence of the human voice necessary for the black slave narrator effectively to transform himself – and to represent this transformation – from silent object to speaking subject, in the form of a life containable in autobiography”. Gates, *Signifying*, p.165. After Jea slave narratives become more secular and feature scenes of literacy instruction rather than episodes of a (non-) talking book. Gates notes, however, that the trope was refigured in the mid-Nineteenth Century mystical writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson (unpublished until 1981) which “chart the liberation of a (black) woman from a (black) man over the letter of the text”. Gates, *Signifying*, p.241.

<sup>114</sup> Gates, *Signifying*, p.240.

<sup>115</sup> Gates, *Signifying*, p.131.

Allusions to issues of literacy and orality within *Jazz* point towards Morrison's concern. For example, of one character readers are told "Malvonne lived alone with newspapers and other people's stories printed in small books. When she was not making her office building sparkle, she was melding the print stories with her keen observation of the people around her" (40-1). Because she synthesises the knowledge she gains from the written word with that gleaned from her own experience "[v]ery little escape[s] this woman" (40). A reader depicted less positively, however, is Dorcas' aunt whose bedroom is "stacked" with newspapers (72).

Everybody needs a pile of newspapers: to peel potatoes on, serve bathroom needs, wrap garbage. But not like Alice Manfred. She must have read them over and over else why would she keep them? ... The best thing to find out what's going on is to watch ... If she had come out more often, sat on the stoop or gossiped in front of the beauty shop, she would have known more than what the paper said. She might have known what was happening under her nose (72-3).

Rather than informing her, Alice's newspapers appear to have misled her, to have diverted her attention from the world around her. The suggestion is that if she had participated in neighbourhood life instead of isolating herself, then she might have known about Joe and Dorcas. The narrative thus signals ambivalence, hinting that acts of literacy might inhibit other modes of assimilating information. Alice's experience at a protest about the East St. Louis race riots furthers this exploration: "She read the words and looked at Dorcas ... Some great gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection ... between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words. Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance" (58).<sup>116</sup> Alice is unable to link the text of a leaflet about anti-black violence to her niece, newly orphaned by it. The printed facts fail to speak to her, she cannot relate them to the devastation of her family. Only when she hears the drums can she connect Dorcas' personal tragedy to the otherwise non-Talking Book. Here sound, the "complicated anger" of the march's rhythm, is a

necessary supplement to literature (59). Observation using her auditory senses, as well as her ability to read, is what brings Alice understanding: “Fifth Avenue was put into focus now and so was her protection of the ... girl in her charge” (55).<sup>117</sup>

One final reference to literacy is made in Felice’s narrative when she describes the rare visits of her parents:

My father ... read the stacks of newspapers me and my grandmother saved for him. The Amsterdam, the Age, The Crisis, The Messenger, the Worker ... He groans and grunts while he reads and once in a while he laughs, but he’d never give it up ... The good part for him is to read everything and argue about what he’s read with my mother and grandmother and [their] friends (199).

Here Morrison alludes to the many publications addressed specifically to African American and / or working class readers then available in Harlem. These gave voice to political concerns and reached an unprecedentedly wide audience.<sup>118</sup>

Felice’s father is an avid reader of such newspapers, responding to, and entering into dialogue about their content. His engagement with texts is hence neither passive nor alienating, different to Alice’s. Felice continues, now “my father has a job on the Pullman ... When he reads the papers and magazines he still grunts and talks back to the printed words, but he gets them first and freshly folded and his arguments aren’t so loud. ‘I’ve seen the world now’, he says” (204). When he replies orally to the printed word, this character participates in a scene reminiscent of the trope of the Talking Book. Here, however, a black reader finds a text that speaks to him, actively relating its message to his own experience. The examples of reading discussed above all seem to promote a model of literacy that engages with the world beyond the page, sometimes

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<sup>116</sup> Here *Jazz* refers to the Silent Protest Parade of 1917, “the first massive Negro protest in American history. Some 10,000 blacks marched down Fifth Avenue in absolute silence save for the roll of muffled drums”. Douglas, p.326.

<sup>117</sup> Previously she chose not to listen to the jazz and blues of Harlem, such alienation again being associated with reading: “she knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn’t real music – just colored folks’ stuff” (59).

<sup>118</sup> The text refers to *The New York Amsterdam News*, a leading black weekly founded in 1909, *The New York Age*, *The Crisis* which was the monthly magazine of the NAACP started in 1910, *The Messenger*, a leading African American journal of the Socialist Party that was forced into collapse in 1928 due to resistance to the unionisation policies of its editor, Randolph (it is perhaps significant that he was also the founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to which Felice’s father might have belonged?), and *The Daily Worker*, a communist paper that Richard Wright was later to edit in Harlem.

specifically with the aural. Reading in isolation is presented as problematic, yet other ways of reading are celebrated. This depiction not only raises concerns similar to those of the trope identified by Gates, but also suggests what constitutes good and bad practice in terms of approaches to reading *Jazz*.<sup>119</sup>

In a 1995 interview with Angels Carabi Morrison discusses the narration of her novel, explicitly associating it with the phrase “talking book”:

I was looking for a voice and having trouble figuring it out, but then I decided that the voice would be one of assumed knowledge, the voice that says ‘I know everything’ ... then the voice realizes, after hearing other voices, that the narrative is not going to be at all what it predicted. The more it learns about the characters (and they are not what the voice thought) ... it goes on with more knowledge ... The thing is, I could not think of the voice of a person; I know everybody refers to ‘I’ as a woman (because I’m a woman, I guess), but for me, *it was very important that the ‘I’ would say what a typical book would limit itself to, what a physical book would say.* The book uses verbs – ‘I think’, ‘I believe’, ‘I wonder’, ‘I imagine’, ‘I know’ – but it never sits down, it never walks, because it’s a book. *The voice is the voice of a talking book ... I deliberately restricted myself to using an ‘I’ that was only connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the story of the book, as though the book were talking, writing itself, in a sense.* It’s an interesting and overwhelming technical idea to me [my emphasis].<sup>120</sup>

This commentary makes clear how the author envisages her use of the trope of the Talking Book. The predominant narrative voice of *Jazz* is said to adapt in response to other voices. It is described as moving from an assumption of knowledge to the realisation that it can’t predict the plot. It also speaks only

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<sup>119</sup> The instances of reading described within the novel perhaps can be related to the recurrence of situations of storytelling and story listening in black literature noted by Robert Stepto? In an essay proposing that “Afro-American Literature has developed as much because of the culture’s distrust of literacy as because of its abiding faith in it”, Stepto identifies “a mode ... in written narrative which accommodates the performative aesthetic of oral storytelling by fashioning characters (voices) who pose as tellers and hearers”. Stepto, pp.196-200. He writes, “[f]ramed tales by their nature invent story listeners within their narratives, and story readers, through their acts of reading, may be transformed into story listeners. In tale after tale, considerable artistic energy is brought to the task of persuading readers to constitute themselves as listeners, the key issue affecting that activity being whether the reader is to pursue such self-transformations in accord with or at variance with the model of the listener found within the narrative itself”. Stepto, p.204. Morrison in *Jazz* provides models of story *readers*, something that might signal opposition to the conventions observed by Stepto were it not for the participatory and oral nature of the paradigm that is held up for the text’s reader to follow.

from the position of being the artefact of the book. Readerly expectations are hence defied by a lack of omniscient narration and the unusual source of the novel's voice. The sense of improvisation and immediacy implied by dialogic revision, in addition, suggests oral or musical modes of communication, the incorporation of such references in the written text echoing Morrison's discussion elsewhere of translating into print the characteristics of non-literary art forms.<sup>121</sup> I will next attempt to trace some of the features outlined above, exploring the complexities of the narrator's construction.

*Jazz*'s elusive first person voice introduces itself in the distinctive opening line, "Sth, I know that woman" (3). This leaves readers guessing as to who (or what) the speaking "I" may be. In addition, "Sth" is the rendition of a sound, not a word. As Lesoinne observes, "[s]uch an opening sentence instantaneously establishes the orality and aurality of the novel. Moreover, it activates a sense of immediacy: the narrator is addressing someone who is looking at the same scene as he / she is, in a tone of gossipy friendliness between the speaker and the reader who thus turns listener and eyewitness".<sup>122</sup> The next few phrases, "[s]he used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too", indicate that the voice claims privileged knowledge and seeks to draw attention to it (3). Already the narrative assumes vernacular, spoken characteristics and employs the tone of a neighbourhood busybody, appearing to be censorious of "that woman". The narrator declares of the inhabitants of Harlem, "like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband ... was the one who shot the girl" (4). The voice thus identifies itself with the community, yet does not share membership of it, cannot say "we". The ensuing passages are littered with narratorial interjections and self-reflexive comments, for example, "I

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<sup>120</sup> Morrison, 'Interview with Angels Carabi', pp.41-42.

<sup>121</sup> Much before the publication of *Jazz* Morrison emphasised the "non-literary" influences which she attempts to bring into her writing: "If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and *translate them into print*: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance" [my emphasis]. Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing', *Thought: A Review of Culture and Writing*, 59, 235 (1984), 385-390 (pp.388-389). The author has also commented on the importance of sound to her work. See 'Toni Morrison: Sounding Language's Depths', in *In the Vernacular: Interviews at Yale with Sculptors of Culture*, ed. by Melissa E. Biggs (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997), pp.162-168 (pp.165-166).

<sup>122</sup> Lesoinne, p.152.

suppose”, “I can’t say ... But I do know”, “Good Luck and let me know”, “I suspect”, “I can see why”, “it became clear to her (as it was to me)” (4-6). These insistently remind the reader of the first person voice’s presence and create an impression of colloquial speech, of a decidedly non-literary discourse. Such effects foreground orality (although created by words printed on the page) and make *Jazz* what Gates terms a speakerly text.<sup>123</sup>

The reader’s curiosity about the unnamed narrator is soon fully aroused by an intriguing self-portrait: “I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself. But I do know how to take precaution ... I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do” (8). The voice describes its observation and anticipation of life in the thrilling but threatening “big city” (8). Its reference to a lack of muscles confuses readers, leaving them to speculate about who or what is speaking. Such a physical condition can, however, I propose, be associated with the artefact of a Talking Book. Furthermore, the voice, it is revealed, is not omniscient, its “understanding is not *prior to* but, rather, *subject to* the unfolding ... events”.<sup>124</sup> The narrator continues, “[p]eople say I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing, as I have, while your partner overstays at another appointment, or ... fall[s] asleep just as you have begun to speak – well, it can make you inhospitable” (9). This self-reflection indicates insularity and exclusion. Having been previously neglected, the

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<sup>123</sup> A “text whose rhetorical strategies are designed to create the ‘illusion of oral narration’”. Madhu Dubey, ‘The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 32, 2 (1999), 187-206 (p.198).

<sup>124</sup> Rubenstein, ‘History and Story’, p.158. The narrative voice frequently indulges in supposition. For example, it insinuates inside knowledge about Violet’s attempt to steal a baby, “quiet as it’s kept”, yet uses phrases like “as far as I know” and “there is no way to prove it”, signalling uncertainty (17). The narrator’s discussion of how Joe and Dorcas met, in addition, involves speculation: “I’ve wondered about it. What he thought ... and about what he [whispered] to her ... If I remember right, that October lunch in Alice Manfred’s house, something was off” (71). Here the voice is positioned both as a witness and as an outsider reliant on imagination. The narrator also reveals a lack of insight with regards to True Belle’s experience, leaving open all conclusions about her feelings: “I don’t know how hard it was for a slave woman to leave a husband [and] ... two daughters behind with an old aunt ... Perhaps it wasn’t so hard ... Then again, maybe not” (141-2). Furman writes, “[t]he narrator’s observations are sometimes made as a disembodied consciousness whose perspective of city life is without borders ... And yet Morrison’s narrator is not omniscient or infallible ... On the contrary, as a first person narrator, at times she seems to be a character participating in the sequence of events and interacting with other characters”. Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison’s Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p.98.



narrative voice apparently finds it hard to open up to others. Such confessions appear to refer to relationships between people, lovers, yet they can also be interpreted as pertaining to that between a text and its reader. A Talking Book might have been “left standing” just as it had “begun to speak”. And narrative itself can “close off”, withhold information. These descriptions are sufficiently ambiguous to mislead the uninformed reader, yet they nevertheless allow Morrison’s complex invocation of the trope delineated by Gates to be traced.

The narrative voice of *Jazz* believes itself perceptive and insightful, claiming of characters’ experiences “it’s not hard to imagine what it must have been like” (137). It self-consciously refers to the practice it engages in: “Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me – curious, inventive and well-informed” (137). Such figuring out, however, does prove precarious as is illustrated when the narrator gets things wrong. For example, the voice boasts of Joe “I know him so well”, claiming that he is “bound to the track”, caught in a destructive cycle (119-120). Yet when Joe responds, articulating a different version of himself, this position of “assumed knowledge” is undermined.<sup>125</sup> Joe’s enunciation of his own first person discourse recalls Morrison’s discussion of a narrator who has to listen to others, accommodating their voicings. The construction of *Jazz* thus plays out patterns of interaction that are reminiscent of performative, rather than literary artistic forms.<sup>126</sup>

It is Golden Gray’s story, however, that demonstrates best the processes of narrative improvisation. The narrator reveals ambiguity towards the orphan, at times condemning his attitude towards Wild and Lestory outright, at others

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<sup>125</sup> Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.41.

<sup>126</sup> The author observes, “jazz is improvisational ... and the musicians have to be alert constantly. One of the reasons being that it isn’t written and rehearsed for permanence on the page, and the other that there’s a kind of egalitarianism in it, or meritocracy. One person doesn’t dominate the whole performance – or if he or she does, he or she will have to take close, close notice of what another voice or instrument is doing or saying ... No one voice is the correct one, the dominant one, the one that has all of the truth, including the narrator, or especially the narrator. I wanted to get rid of that notion of the omniscient narrative voice”. Toni Morrison, “‘I come from people who sang all the time’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”, with Sheldon Hackney, *Humanities*, 17, 1 (1996), 4-9 & 48-50 (pp.5-6).

showing some sympathy for his plight.<sup>127</sup> This sense of uncertainty is then enacted as two different accounts of his arrival at Lestory's home are presented in the text. This unusual replaying of the same scene leaves readers wondering which version is 'real' and exposes the Talking Book to be changing the story as it tells it.<sup>128</sup> The second narrative of Golden Gray's journey presents a more lyrical picture of the Southern landscape through which he passes. The reworking is also more optimistic in tone, perhaps suggesting an increasingly hopeful interpretation of the son's quest to find his father.<sup>129</sup> Instead of being informed simply that "[t]he rain has stopped for good", readers are asked "[c]an you see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind? The blade of blackbirds rising out of nowhere, brandishing and then gone?" (149 & 153). Addressed directly, *Jazz*'s audience is invited to envisage the scene before the character, so entering into his experience and, along with the shifting narrator, viewing him more favourably. Indeed, the narrative voice revises its former opinion of Golden Gray thus: "I know he is a hypocrite ... Aw, but he is young, young and he is hurting, so I forgive him" (154-5). The narrator now notes the orphan's immaturity and suffering. Such adaptation perhaps suggests a method of experimenting with characterisation as if with jazz phrases?

Although the narrator claims understanding of Golden Gray, asserting "I know better", the character's own first person discourse (achieved through free indirect style) once more necessitates narrative adjustment (154). Like a jazz performer forced to reconsider his interpretation having listened to another musician's contribution, on resuming control the voice asks "[h]ow could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin

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<sup>127</sup> "I've thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved ... Or the vain and hincty pinch-nose ... Come all that way to insult not his father but his race" (143). "[I]f he shuddered at the possibility of [Wild] leaning on him ... it is also true that he overcame the shudder. Swallowed, maybe, and clicked the horse. I like to think of him that way" (150).

<sup>128</sup> As Page observes, "[t]he discrepancies, and the mere fact of the juxtaposition of two competing accounts by the same narrator, calls into question the status of each account and of the narrator's accounting in general. Such an unravelling of the means of narrative transmission calls attention to the narrative and therefore to the act of reading". Page, p.172.

<sup>129</sup> Golden Gray begins to "hear things outside himself. Soaked leaves disentangling themselves one from another. The plop of nuts and the flutter of partridge removing their beaks from their hearts" (150). Whilst in the narrator's initial description of Lestory's house "[t]he cookstove is cold, and the fireplace has a heap of ash, but no embers", in the second "[t]he grandest thing in the room is the fireplace. Clean, set for a new fire, braced with scoured stones, from which two metal arms for holding kettles extend" (147 & 152).

... I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am" (160). Here the narrator admits fallibility and exemplifies the process outlined by Morrison: "the voice realises, after hearing other voices, that the narrative is not going to be at all what it predicted".<sup>130</sup> The voice identifies a failure to conceive character accurately or fully, Golden Gray's articulation, a breach in the main narrative, apparently undermining its monolithic authority. The narrator resolves, "[n]ow I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding ... I have to alter things ... contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it ... I want to be the language that ... speaks his name" (161).<sup>131</sup> The role described here is an affirmative and active one, sympathetic towards Golden Gray. The reference to a language able to speak his name is also possibly an allusion to the Talking Book. For, as Gates explains, in early instances of the trope white texts failed to converse with black subjects. Here, however, the narrative voice hopes to address specifically Golden Gray and his experience, so becoming the very sign and expression of his selfhood.

The narrator's misguided assumption of knowledge is explored through one final, and perhaps most significant revision. Throughout the novel the narrative voice predicts a disastrous resolution to its story. Envisaging Joe, Violet and Felice as a second "scandalizing threesome", at the very outset it claims "[w]hat turned out different was who shot whom" (6). Readers are hence invited to believe that another triangle of passion and violence, like that involving the Traces and Dorcas, will ensue. Later further reference is made to this forthcoming climax, reinforcing the impression that the tale of heartbreak and murder will be repeated.<sup>132</sup> Even towards the end of *Jazz*, describing the arrival of Felice, "another true-as-life Dorcas, four marcelled waves and all", the

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<sup>130</sup> Morrison, 'Interview with Angels Carabi', p.42.

<sup>131</sup> The personal nature of the narrative voice's involvement, illustrated here, is commented on by Gates in his review of *Jazz*: "It remains indeterminate ... But it is alive with feelings and emotions, regard and scorn, blindness and insights about the human actors that conspire to produce this curious tale of love, betrayal, departure, reconciliation, and union". Gates, 'Review of Jazz', p.54.

<sup>132</sup> "[I]t tired everybody out waiting to see what else Violet would do besides try to kill a dead girl ... My own opinion was that one day she would ... light his hair with a matchstick. She didn't but maybe that would have been better than what she did do. Meaning to or not meaning to, she got him to go through it again – at springtime" (118-9).

narrator remarks, “[n]o day to wreck a life already splintered like a cheap windowpane” (197). This ominous comment increases the reader’s sense of foreboding. Yet, recalling the image of Felice from the novel’s opening, the voice then begins to express uncertainty: “She carried an Okeh record under her arm ... Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her sauntering through the sun shafts like that. Climbing the steps now, heading for [Violet]” (197-8). The narrative voice first refers to the girl in the past tense, “she *carried*”, but then shifts to describing the present moment, “*Climbing* the steps *now*”. This movement suggests immediacy and reveals the narrator’s former assurance to be shaken. Indeed, the voice’s previous predictions are thrown into question, causing it some distress. In a possible parallel to the re-evaluation necessitated by both Joe’s and Golden Gray’s articulations, here the narrator’s forecast of further devastation for the Traces is undermined. In fact when Felice’s first person narrative takes over, the development of a friendship with Joe and Violet quite unlike what was prophesised is detailed (see 198). This unexpected outcome accords with Morrison’s vision of the Talking Book: “Because the voice has to actually imagine the story it’s telling ... it’s in trouble ... the story that it thought it knew turns out to be entirely different from what it predicted because the characters will be evolving within the story, within the book”.<sup>133</sup> Thus the Traces’ journey to maturity means that they are no longer bound to the track mapped out for them.

The narrative voice, therefore, again must confront its arrogance and fallibility:

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it ... That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack ... I was so sure ... Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable – human, I guess you’d say, while I was the predictable one ... thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered ... I dismissed what went on in heart-pockets closed to me ... It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of (220-1).

On discovering that the threesome of Felice, Joe and Violet is not what it foresaw, the narrative voice recognises the limited nature of its perspective. *Jazz*

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<sup>133</sup> Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.41.

is revealed as a 'live' performance in which the narrator learns to listen to, and take account of other voicings. Ignoring the possibility of interior motivation and character evolution has led only to miscalculation: "I believed I saw everything important they did, and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn't" (221). Through a thorough self-examination the narrative voice even perceives its vicarious dependency on sensationalism: "I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder?" (219). As the narrator's previous pomposity is replaced by contrition, conventional ideas of narrative authority are destabilised.<sup>134</sup> In addition, in realising its error the Talking Book learns about its subjects and so is able to relate how Joe and Violet, instead of attacking one another, are finally reconciled.<sup>135</sup>

Describing the intimacy shared by the Traces in their new City life at the end of *Jazz*, the narrator's own feelings once more come to the fore:

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed ... to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back ... That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick.* But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now (229).

The novel's closing passages reveal the narrative voice to be racked with secret love and longing. Yet they are also significant with regards to Morrison's reworking of the trope of the Talking Book. The depiction of Joe and Violet's

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<sup>134</sup> As Duvall points out, "[t]he narrator's confident predictions at the beginning (which outline the story and intimate a denouement of violent repetition when Felice again triangulates the relationship between Joe and Violet Trace) turn to uncertain speculation about Golden Gray and finally a frank admission of error and limitation". John N. Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.133.

“whispering old time love” contributes to an evocation of the physicality of a book (see 228). Repeated references to “under the covers” allude to book jackets as well as bedclothes (228). The phrase “leaf sigh” is, in addition, reminiscent of the turning pages of a printed text (228). Even the description of Joe and Violet in bed as “inward toward the other, bound and joined”, suggests an image of the two halves of an opened book (228). The narrative voice, jealous of such affection, proceeds with a passionate lament about what it can’t say “aloud”, its italicised declaration exposing *Jazz* to be “a love song of a book talking to the reader”.<sup>136</sup> The voice here addresses the reader directly, confessing its abandon and pleading for a reciprocal relationship. It also, however, speaks explicitly as the artefact of a Talking Book. It loves the closeness of the reader’s hold, his or her touch as pages are lifted and turned. It misses the reader’s eyes when they are gone. Unequivocally drawing the current reader’s attention to his or her own act, it proclaims “[t]alking to you and hearing you answer – that’s the kick ... Look where your hands are. Now”. This culminates the reader’s unusual intercourse with the narrator, playing out Morrison’s preoccupation with “how the whole act of ... holding, surrendering to a book, is part of that beautiful intimacy of reading”.<sup>137</sup>

Explaining “the job of the book was to reach that ending”, the author confers considerable importance on this conclusion (and its tropological revision).<sup>138</sup> Instead of featuring a master’s text which refuses to speak to a black slave, failing to recognise him as a subject, *Jazz* presents, indeed constitutes, a Talking Book that desires its reader, calls out to him or her. The communion taking place with the reader gives the book purpose: “I have been waiting for this all my life”. And active participation is required to bring narrative into being, to “make” and “remake” it.<sup>139</sup> This passage signals the complete overthrow of the narrator’s

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<sup>135</sup> Morrison explains, “[i]t began to imagine another kind of life taking place. You could never imagine those two could reconcile, but they are able to – not because the voice says so, but because the voice discovers who they are”. Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.42.

<sup>136</sup> Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.42.

<sup>137</sup> Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.42. She continues, “[w]hen it’s tactile, your emotions are deeply involved; if it’s a good book, if you’re just there”. Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.42.

<sup>138</sup> Morrison quoted by Bigsby, p.29.

<sup>139</sup> Morrison frequently refers to her fictional project in terms of the reader’s contribution: “I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and

former inhospitality, “I close off in places”, and perhaps crafts a reply to Robert Stepto’s discussion of manifestations of distrust towards the reader in African American literature (9)?<sup>140</sup> Although the narrative voice believes itself mute, “[i]f I were able I’d say it”, it does, of course, speak. For in this reworking of the (non-) Talking Book the book talks throughout. Far from a silencing, this is a giving voice, a complex negotiation of orality within the written word.<sup>141</sup>

Through her construction of narrative voice in *Jazz*, I propose that Morrison extends the trope of the Talking Book, positioning her work within a distinctive literary tradition instituted by early black Atlantic texts.<sup>142</sup> Her novel reinvents the trope (and conventional ideas of first ‘person’ narration) by having the artefact of the book itself speak. In addition, the voice claims authority but then reveals its fallibility, offers one version of events followed by another, judges characters only to have them talk back. These features enact processes of improvisation, adaptation, dialogue and evolution, all suggestive of musical and / or oral artistic forms and thus central to Morrison’s conception of a *talking* book.<sup>143</sup> The narrative voice’s movement from ill informed arrogance to an

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participatory relationship between the ... speaker and the audience that is of primary importance ... To make the story appear oral ... spoken ... and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book – is what’s important”. Morrison, ‘Rootedness’, p.341.

<sup>140</sup> Stepto’s exploration of storytelling and listening within written texts is useful. Morrison, however, I propose, reveals a relation to the reader in *Jazz* different to that identified by Stepto. He writes, “[i]n Afro-American storytelling texts especially, rhetoric and narrative strategy combine time and again to declare that the principal unreliable factor in the storytelling paradigm is the reader (white American readers, obviously, but blacks as well)”. Stepto, p.202. See also my previous footnote.

<sup>141</sup> Failing to place the construction of the narrative voice of *Jazz* within the Talking Book tradition, Madhu Dubey reads the novel’s conclusion (and its aspirations towards orality) very differently. She writes, “[i]n expressing its desire for intimate contact with the reader through the image of the reader’s hands holding the book, *Jazz* forces a recognition of the fact that novelistic communication is inevitably mediated by the material object of the book, a commodity that cannot transcend its conditions of production and reception”. Madhu Dubey, ‘Migration and Narration: Jazz and Vernacular Theories of Black Women’s Fiction’, *American Literary History*, 10, 2 (1998), 291-316 (pp.304-9). She elides the novel’s emphasis on dialogue, improvisation and auralty, its figuration of reading as a participatory engagement that doesn’t have to be isolating. She concludes, “[a]lthough some sections of *Jazz* do bear Morrison’s distinctive marks of oralized narration, they are strongly overwritten by the final chapter of the novel, which laments the narrator’s overall inability to activate the call-and-response dynamic of black oral forms”. Dubey, ‘Migration and Narration’, p.305.

<sup>142</sup> The narratives that Gates surveys were authored by ex-slaves from Britain and North America whose relations were obviously dialogic, so offering transatlantic perspectives.

<sup>143</sup> According to the author, “it was technically difficult to write a novel that was supposed to feel as if it was improvised ... It’s all planned but it should look unplanned. The narrator was designed to be unreliable and to have only part of the story and to be the one that was most inaccurate by the time one reaches the end, but at the same time, the narrator learned about its

acute awareness of its failings might also bear some relation to the rhetorical strategies employed by the texts that *The Signifying Monkey* examines. Indeed, as the narrator of *Jazz* plays out change, readers witness what Gates terms a text of “becoming”.<sup>144</sup> Morrison so creates a complex voicing, one that echoes her literary precursors, strives towards something akin to a jazz performance, celebrates vernacular speech patterns and even provides models of how (not) to employ literacy for its own reader / listener.

Preoccupations with issues of literacy and orality in writings of the black diaspora signal many contradictions. For example, as the early authors considered by Gates struggled to assert their subjectivity and intellect they turned towards literary composition (and often literariness). At the same time, however, as Madhu Dubey observes, “print literacy was ... thoroughly implicated in the definitions of humanity, reason, and culture that bolstered the institution of slavery”.<sup>145</sup> Morrison, along with other contemporary black writers, seeks to figure the oral on the page, an ambition connected to the assertion of a distinctive non-literary cultural heritage.<sup>146</sup> Complex tropes of speaking, reading and writing, however, are nothing new. As Gates points out, “[t]he paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral within the written, precisely when

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own vulnerability. I wanted to explode the idea of an all-knowing, omnipotent, totalitarian, authorial voice and to parallel the democratic impulse of jazz ensembles”. Morrison, Toni, ‘Transcript’, 21 January 1998, 24 April 2001, <[www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html](http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html)>

<sup>144</sup> Gates, p.157. For example, Equiano skilfully contrasts his earlier innocent, illiterate and enslaved self to his ‘present’ knowing and erudite narrating self.

<sup>145</sup> Dubey, ‘The Politics of Genre’, p.195.

<sup>146</sup> Morrison’s novels aspire “to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well”. Morrison, ‘Rootedness’, p.341. Oral heritage is also of course affirmed within her fiction through motifs such as the song in *Song of Solomon*.



oral black culture was transforming itself into a written culture, proved to be of sufficient concern for five of the earliest black autobiographies to repeat the same figure of the Talking Book that fails to speak, appropriating the figure accordingly with embellished rhetorical differences".<sup>147</sup> The sophistication of Morrison's construction in *Jazz* can therefore only elaborate further this tradition.

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<sup>147</sup> Gates, *Signifying*, pp.131-2.

## Chapter Four - *Paradise*

This chapter explores the significance of the oppositional communities of Ruby and the Convent as depicted in Toni Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*. It is divided into two parts. The first addresses the corruption of the utopian vision of an all black settlement in the West. I approach the degeneration of this dream town through the theme of war, also examining the complex meanings of military service for African Americans in relation to questions of belonging and dislocation. Whilst Morrison's narrative is haunted by the losses of Vietnam, it fails to engage critically with the political debate surrounding this controversial conflict. *Paradise*, however, explores the dynamics of militarism and imperialism through the story of Ruby, its othering of those who don't match its exclusive conception of home, its rhetoric of aggression against a demonised enemy, and ultimately its recourse to violence. Although defining itself as a community separate from the rest of American society, the town, I suggest, comes to replicate dominant national ideologies.

My chapter next considers *Paradise*'s portrayal of religion in order to investigate the alternative utopia of the Convent. Whilst institutional religion is allied with patriarchy, conservatism and colonisation, through the depiction of Consolata's mission non-institutional forms of worship are celebrated. Set against the insularity, conformism and ethnic absolutism of Ruby is the heterogeneous household of the Convent. Here not only is patriarchal Christianity re-envisioned but also an affirmative model of New World creolisation is formulated. Indeed, I propose that the novel addresses the complex evolution of black diaspora cultures by invoking African Brazilian Candomblé. This reference to the syncretism of South American religious practices furthers Morrison's engagement with trajectories of exchange within the black Atlantic. My analysis is informed by Edouard Glissant's theory of the cross-cultural relationships engendered by slavery.

## I. “When all the wars are over”: The Dynamics of Utopianism and Militarism

In *Jazz* Toni Morrison portrays a particular moment of optimism related to the end of World War One, evoking the 1920s as a time “when all the wars are over and there will never be another one”, when “everything’s ahead at last” (7). Indeed, Joe Trace recalls his own jubilation and pride at marching alongside returning black troops in Harlem: “in 1919 ... I walked all the way ... with the three six nine ... because the War had come and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two” (129).<sup>1</sup> This hopeful vision of the postwar future raises issues of how for African Americans military service can be tied up with concerns about ‘Americanness’, with proving manhood, patriotism and bravery, and therefore asserting belonging. The black claim to citizenship (felt to have been earned through sacrifices made for the nation), however, remained problematic after the war. For *Jazz* also details the East St. Louis rioting that was, in part, prompted by discharged and “disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units ... and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honor” (57). The proud return from World War One was thus often accompanied for black soldiers by disillusionment and disappointment at the inequality and violent oppression still in operation at home, the lack of political agency unchanged by their efforts overseas on behalf of America and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The 369th regiment was an all black unit of American soldiers assigned in World War I to fight with French troops. For their bravery they were dubbed the Harlem Hellfighters.

<sup>2</sup> In 1995 Morrison discussed the postwar violence that faced such veterans: “World War I – like all the other wars – called black men to serve ... They fought for the country that lynched them, and when they came back and wore their uniforms in many parts of the country, they were again lynched. There were a lot of emasculations ... People were snatched out of houses and burned, killed, or maimed. So the violence was particularly nasty after the war”. Toni Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, *Belles Lettres*, 10, 2 (1995), 40-43 (p.40). In *Song of Solomon* the character of Reverend Cooper has “a knot the size of a walnut ... behind his ear” from when white Philadelphians objected to the attendance of black soldiers at an Armistice Day parade (233). In the fracas caused by whites throwing rocks, the police ran down the uniformed veterans with horses, the hoof of one causing Reverend Cooper’s permanent bodily disfigurement. In addition, many African American servicemen were mentally scarred by their experiences on the battlefields of World War One. Morrison explores this in her second novel *Sula* through the

Bearing such considerations in mind, I wish to argue that war and its aftermath is central to the conception of the novel that concludes Morrison's so-called trilogy, *Paradise*. Indeed, *Paradise* was originally going to be entitled *War*.<sup>3</sup> Exploring aspects of the text to which this title would have drawn explicit attention, I attempt to interrogate what military service means for African Americans, the definitions of 'home' that emerge from experiences of combat overseas and Morrison's depiction of the rhetoric and repercussions of war through the embattled stance taken by the all black town of Ruby. For, according to Carolyn Denard, Morrison "places at center stage men who embrace violence".<sup>4</sup> I propose that *Paradise* delineates the corruption of a utopian vision that, although engendered by postwar dispossession, itself becomes oppressive and eventually and inevitably leads to further aggression. Here an African American community which defines itself against the rest of America, comes to emulate and rehearse the structures and recourse to violence of the dominant culture.

Male departure to, and return from war is a pattern of movement that shapes Ruby's story. The town's history is situated according to participation in the two World Wars and following conflicts in Asia, and much of the narrative present is overshadowed by, not only the Civil Rights struggle, but also the Vietnam War. Once troop desegregation begins in Korea, military service brings exposure to the interracial contact that is increasingly viewed as corruptive by the Founding Fathers of Ruby. Yet, in apparent opposition to the community's wish to isolate itself from the dissolute world around it, from other populations both white and black, combat with the national armed forces is still regarded as commendable, as formative. It remains somehow bound up with proving fortitude and

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character of Shadrack who is left "[b]lasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917" (7). In 1920 Shadrack returns to occupy a marginalised position in his home town, "[t]wenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was ... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book ... no pocket handkerchief ... no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do" (12).

<sup>3</sup> Apparently the title was changed because Knopf feared it might put off Morrison fans. Whilst publicising the book the author commented, "I'm still not convinced they were right". Toni Morrison, 'This Side of Paradise', with Anna Mulrine, 19 January 1998, 21 April 2001, <<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/980119/19new.htm>>

manhood, with the patriarchs' self-righteous defence of the place they have "cut ... out of mud" for themselves in this land (6).

As I will explore later, going away to war crystallises particular ideas of home and community. And the veterans' postwar vision for Ruby leads to an attack on outsiders. Indeed, the terms of the 'protection' of the town from external threat echo the codes of national fortress building. Hence I suggest that, although Morrison's text fails to present an explicit critique of American militarism and imperialism, despite a focus on the era of Vietnam, attempts to engage with such dynamics by indirect means can be identified in her narrative. Above all, violence erodes hope of a time "when all the wars are over" as described in *Jazz*.

The long history of African American service in the U.S. military involves segregation, subordination and overlooked contributions. In the early Twentieth Century fighting in the First World War offered black soldiers fresh hope of earning a place, and correspondingly more rights, as citizens in modern American society. As mentioned with reference to *Jazz*, such ambitions, however, often met with violent white backlashes and governmental hostility or indifference during the postwar period. The contradictions of racially segregated forces fighting for 'American' ideals of democratic equality and freedom became acutely evident during World War Two, a conflict in which the Allies defined themselves against a supremacist enemy practising racial persecution and removing civil liberties. Yet, "[i]n the years following World War II, a wave of violence swept the South as African American veterans returned home".<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam War brought full military desegregation but drafting was biased against the economically disadvantaged, black casualties were disproportionately higher than white ones and racial tensions within American forces erupted at moments such as the assassination of Martin Luther King.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Denard, 'Paradise', *MS*, 8, 5 (1998), 80 (p.80).

<sup>5</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.23.

<sup>6</sup> Today the U.S. military advertises itself as one of the most integrated institutions of the nation yet this arguably demonstrates only the racial prejudice and economic inequality still so prevalent elsewhere in American society. Vietnam veteran, Arthur E. 'Gene' Woodley, Jr. explains in Wallace Terry's recording of oral accounts from African American servicemen, "I didn't ask no questions about the war, I thought Communism was spreading, and as an American citizen, it was my part to do as much as I could to defeat the Communist from coming here ... And I thought the

The narrative of *Paradise* itself is littered with references to military service and past American conflicts are frequently invoked. In 1949 when naming their town, the men of the community, nearly all ex-soldiers, make suggestions connected to the Second World War: "Pacific veterans liked Guam, others Inchon. Those who fought in Europe kept coming up with names only the children enjoyed pronouncing" (17). Elsewhere brief mention is made of a "Purple Heart" and "army-issue tents" (10). Steward Morgan's sense of "home" is defined in terms of the ranch "where his American flag flew on holidays; where his honorable discharge papers were framed" (88). And military training is seen as a testing ground, as the sphere in which the town leaders proved themselves as young men. The narrative of Ruby's past is oriented by U.S. conflicts: Reverend Cary "was not among the first families, so his arrival was associated not with World War II, but with Korea" (204). And allusion is made to the prosperity, the "[w]ar money", that international hostilities prompt for Americans (107). The novel is also, however, threaded through with the losses and deaths caused by war. One ex-soldier remembers "military crosses spread for miles", and some female characters have been left widowed by men who died in "Europe or Korea or someplace" (154 & 199). All of these references work to establish an historical model of service in the military, of departure and return, honour and bereavement. Such themes are key to both the envisioning and the collapse of this "dreamtown" (5).

The narrative present of *Paradise* covers a period extending from 1968 to 1976 and in most of the many character perspectives provided there is some allusion to the war being conducted in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> These details situate the town's story and constantly remind the reader of the U.S.A.'s controversial part in this conflict.

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only way I could possibly make it out of the ghetto, was to be the best soldier I possibly could". Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), pp.238-9. Economic deprivation remains a catalyst for young black men to join the military in search of a way out (and 'up') today. And often service in the armed forces is still seen as 'proof' of citizenship for non-white Americans who buy into national ideologies, mostly unquestioning of how such participation might be complicit in their country's oppression of non-whites elsewhere in the world.

<sup>7</sup> *Paradise* is made up of nine chapters or books, each headed by the name of a female character from either the town or the Convent. Within each chapter, however, Morrison employs multiple narrative focalizers.

For example, in the account of Mavis' flight from domestic violence, mention is made of her "killed-in-action brothers" and "the checks in two brown government envelopes" that after their deaths were sent to her mother (32). In addition, one of the hitchhikers that Mavis picked up whilst on the run "talked for thirty-two miles ... about the owners of the six dog tags that hung from her neck. Boys in her high school or whom she had known in junior high ... All dead or missing" (34). Such Vietnam casualties, although evident only from understated references, from gaps and silences, echo through the chapters of *Paradise*. Later Mavis dropped another two girls at a cemetery where "[l]ines of cars necklaced the entrance ... [they] thanked Mavis and got out, running a little to join a set of graveside mourners ... What she thought were military students turned out to be real soldiers – but young, so young, and as fresh-looking as the headstones they stood before" (34). This minor episode suggests the tragedy of the many lives lost in Vietnam, the numerous fresh grave markers, the youth of the boy soldiers, and of the girls hitching to mourn their male peers. In 1974 even Reverend Misner wonders, "[h]ad the times finally gotten to him? ... Had the long, unintelligible war infected him? Behaving like a dormant virus in blossom now that it was coming to a raggedy close? Everybody on his high school football team died in that war. Eleven broad-backed boys. They were the ones he had looked up to, wanted to be like. Was he just now gagging at their futile death?" (160). This undercurrent of commentary on the losses of Vietnam flows through the text, although the politics of the war are not confronted head on. Indeed, Misner's description of a wasted generation, of the war as unintelligible and futile, is as overt as Morrison's criticism gets.<sup>8</sup>

Among the townspeople Jeff Fleetwood is a serviceman whose grievances with the Veteran's Administration on his return from Vietnam include his four

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<sup>8</sup> Making a similar point Tally writes, "[t]he war and its decimation of the young black male population permeates *Paradise* even though it never makes a frontal appearance: there are repeated references to dogtags, body bags, funerals ... Like the Civil War in *Beloved* and World War I in *Jazz*, the Vietnam War in *Paradise* is an ever-present given. Unlike the Civil War, which liberated the slaves, and World War I, which gave blacks new hope that, having performed so well in battle and having been so well-accepted in Europe, they could no longer be denied full citizenship in the U.S, the Vietnam War reaffirmed the conviction that African American males were being used again as so much cannon fodder; fully 60% of the names on the Vietnam War memorial are those of blacks". Justine Tally, *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths*, FORECAAST 2 (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1999), p.26.

severely disabled children whose condition he blames on the war (see 58 & 156). As Justine Tally observes, “Jeff’s complaint before the Administration is never specified, but the fact that he is ignored ... may point to the government’s reluctance to admit that exposure to Agent Orange causes malformation in offspring”.<sup>9</sup> Whilst this veteran’s sense of frustration manifests itself in violent rage, other community members are haunted by loss. Soane Morgan’s narrative tells of her sons, Scout and Easter, who were killed within two weeks of each other: “Babies. One nineteen, the other twenty-one. How proud and happy she was when they enlisted; she had actively encouraged them to do so ... Like a fool she believed her sons would be safe ... Now she had four unopened letters mailed in 1968” (100-101). Soane is left mourning the death of both her children, punishing herself for the pride and joy she experienced at their enlistment, too scared to open their last letters home. Her husband, “like most of the Morgans, had seen action, which is to say live death ... He knew that bodies did not lie down; that most often they flew apart and that what had been shipped to them in those boxes ... was a collection of parts that weighed half of what a nineteen-year-old would” (112). Deacon is filled with helpless anger at the thought of his sons being “[b]uried in a bag like kittens” (106). The pain of their loss is amplified by his own knowledge of the horror of wartime death, the violent rending of the body that takes place, and the partiality of the corpses that were sent back to Ruby. In this explicit confrontation with the likely condition of Scout and Easter’s remains, notions of bravery and honour collapse into abject grief, even shame.

This conflict, it appears, prompts no parade celebrating the return of courageous black veterans, nor a white backlash against such soldiers. Vietnam instead looms like a spectre over the narrative present. Despite frustration and hurt like that of Deacon discussed above, *Paradise* does not really engage critically with the controversial involvement of American forces in Eastern Asia. Nor does Morrison’s narrative raise issues of the draft or of the objections preoccupying the black public figures who spoke out against the war at the time. Muhammad Ali’s televised comments about his refusal to go to Vietnam provide

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<sup>9</sup> Tally, pp.26-7.



just one example of African American protest at the U.S.A.'s imperialist forays against non-whites elsewhere in the world: "They want me to go to Vietnam to shoot some black folks that never lynched me, never called me nigger, never assassinated my leaders".<sup>10</sup> Before his death Martin Luther King also damned American foreign policy, charging the U.S. government with being "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today".<sup>11</sup> The failure to acknowledge such questioning of militarism is remiss in *Paradise*. The novel sketches the domestic strife of the Civil Rights struggle, yet does not place it next to the violent repression that African Americans were being asked to participate in alongside whites overseas. In the dynamics of the narrative, however, an exploration of aggression as a reaction to difference, and of supremacist positioning, does take place. Although Morrison's depiction of the war sidesteps much of the political debate surrounding Vietnam, issues of militarism, of defence, belonging and 'othering', are tackled indirectly in the story of the town of Ruby.

This story begins in 1890 when, disappointed by the failures of Reconstruction, a group of ex-slaves from Louisiana and Mississippi set off to find a new home in the American West.<sup>12</sup> The freedmen eventually reach the aptly named Fairly,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by James Maycock, 'War Within War', *Guardian Weekend*, 15 September 2001, 20-28 (p.23).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Maycock, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Commenting on this era Morrison notes, "[d]uring Reconstruction, which occurred after 1865, two things happened. First, there was a lot of migration of black people. They built towns, and in some places – particularly the West – they were very well organized and prosperous. There were over 100 black towns in Oklahoma, with their own banks, schools, and churches ... But there was also a huge backlash during Reconstruction. Blacks were attacked by white people, including the business community, because they were making a lot of money, were self-sufficient, and were on land that other people wanted. Then the lynchings began to increase. So there was a combination of dashed hopes of freedom after the [Civil] war and some successes". Morrison, 'Interview with Angels Carabi', p.40. In an article published shortly after *Paradise* Julian Borger examines one of the surviving black-run communities of the West. Rentiesville "is one of the last of Oklahoma's black pioneer towns, the defiant stump of a forgotten but remarkable project. The dream was for the towns to merge together into a black state – a utopia, where freed slaves and their families could till the land and build a new society free from white discrimination, with a new-found self-confidence born of emancipation and the triumphant black role in the Civil War". Julian Borger, 'Paradise Lost', *The Guardian*, 6 October 1998, 2-3 (p.2). "War veterans and the families of ex-slaves fleeing the rising tide of post-reconstruction racism congregated [in Oklahoma], and founded a total of 27 black-run towns, a dozen of which are still on the map". Borger, p.3. This history has obvious resonances with Morrison's exploration in *Paradise*. Kristin Hunt writes, "Haven was founded by freed black slaves who, like many of the Euroamerican settlers preceding them, regarded themselves as pilgrims bent on erecting a providential community". Kristin Hunt, 'Paradise Lost: The Destructive Forces of Double-Consciousness and Boundaries in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', in *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, ed. by John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), pp.117-127 (p.119).

a black town that is being built by light skinned African Americans in Oklahoma. The newcomers, however, are turned away, dismissed, perhaps for their poverty, more likely for their dark skin, so they move on and set up a town called Haven for themselves. The painful memory of being excluded by fellow blacks, named the Disallowing, shapes the ex-slaves into “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them” (189).<sup>13</sup> Fairly’s rejection causes them to choose self-sufficiency and isolation, in fact “[e]verything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven ... lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many” (189). And when later generations see this settlement fail, a group of World War Two veterans try to repeat their forefathers’ project by moving further West and founding a new community called Ruby. The entrenched position they adopt, however, comes to betray the original vision.<sup>14</sup>

The America that faces these veterans on being discharged is little more receptive than that which met the First World War soldiers described in *Jazz*:

The rejection, which they called the Disallowing, was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn’t it? Oh, no. Those that survived that particular war came right back home, saw what had become of Haven, heard about the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy – and recognised the Disallowing, Part Two. It would have been like watching a parade banner that said WAR-WEARY SOLDIERS! NOT WELCOME HOME! So they did it again. And just as the original wayfarers never sought another colored townsite after being cold-shouldered at the first, this generation joined no organisation, fought no

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<sup>13</sup> Discussing the genesis of her novel Morrison explains, “I read a lot of newspapers about the people who went to Oklahoma. About soliciting people to settle Black towns ... And I got interested in one little sentence ... ‘Come prepared or not at all’. It encouraged people to come with a year or two or three of supplies or money, so that if things didn’t go right they would be able to take care of themselves. And the newspaper articles indicated how many people came with fifteen thousand dollars and so on, but there was a little paragraph about two caravans of Black people who got to Boley or Langston, or one of those towns, and were turned away ... So I thought about what it must feel like to make that trek, and be turned away by some Black people ... So I’ve taken that route – these people just go somewhere else. They’re determined to make it, and they do. But it makes them very isolationist ... They’re very separatist people”. Toni Morrison, ‘Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison’, with Carolyn Denard, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31, 2 (1998), 1-16 (pp.11-12).

<sup>14</sup> “Most of [those black towns] disappeared, but I’m going to project one that moved away from the collapse of an original black town ... They went from being very rebellious, to being progressive, to stability. Then they got compromised and reactionary and were unable to adjust to new things happening”. Morrison, ‘Interview with Angels Carabi’, p.43.

civil battle. They consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved farther west (194).

For African American servicemen the return 'home' to the U.S.A. meant coming back to violence rather than gratitude, humiliation rather than pride. The greeting the Haven veterans receive from white society causes them to attempt to replicate what the ex-slaves did following Fairly's contemptuous dismissal. Rather than combating the Jim Crow laws of their segregated and unjust nation by joining forces with Civil Rights campaigners, the patriarchs of Ruby opt for separatism, placing as much distance as they can between their homes and other communities (both white and black).<sup>15</sup> Faced with the erosion of Haven by migration, poverty and white encroachment the veterans see a "dwindling postwar future" (16). Threatened by "unmonitored and seething" violence, a world "where your children were sport, your women quarry ... where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse", they opt to protect their families by removing them beyond the rest of society (16).<sup>16</sup> And "like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers ... headed not for ... Saint Louis, Houston, Langston, or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made" (16). Against the dominant flow of African American migration, the community goes further west onto land purchased with pooled discharge pay (so echoing the earlier movement of European American pioneers).<sup>17</sup>

The new patriarchs feel that they are repeating their forefathers' choices, yet the inflexibility with which they adopt laws of exclusion perhaps means that the spirit of their community's previous way of life is lost. This male generation's service in the armed forces has crystallised, but also frozen, their ideas of home

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<sup>15</sup> For a reading that associates this decision with "the black nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the Black Aesthetic" see Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p.155.

<sup>16</sup> Oklahoma has a long history of racial violence. In the novel it is described as "a state shaped like a gun" and, as Morrison notes, it is also home to Tulsa where in 1921 the government first bombed its own citizens from the air, attacking a black neighbourhood for sheltering a fugitive (16). Morrison, 'Interview with Angels Carabi', p.40.

<sup>17</sup> In following this frontier model, heading not towards the traditional African American promised land of the North, but West, the people of Ruby and their utopian hopes are perhaps symbolically aligned with dominant national mythologies? Interestingly a group of escaped slaves also go West at the very end of Shirley Anne Williams' novel *Dessa Rose* (London: Virago, 1986).

and, in particular, of the desirable conduct of women. Their memories become idealised whilst away and with their decision to move deeper into isolation the veterans don a mantle of superiority, of independence but also pride, scorning all those outside their haven.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, I argue that the ex-soldiers assume a rigidity of attitude and ethnic absolutism not found in the tales of their predecessors. As Cyrus Patell observes, “[b]uilt in opposition both to the white culture and to the other black communities that once shunned its inhabitants, Ruby’s communitarianism nevertheless organizes itself around conceptions of racial purity and patriarchal authority”.<sup>19</sup>

The servicemen were accompanied through the Second World War by their vision of home: “Loving what Haven had been – the idea of it and its reach – they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart” (6). And having romanticised the community, once discharged and disappointed the ex-soldiers seek to recreate Haven as they pictured it. This is illustrated by their attitude towards food:

Back from the war, [the] men were hungry for down-home food, but dreaming of it for three years had raised their expectations, exaggerated the possibilities of lard making biscuits lighter than snow, the responsibility sharp cheese took on in hominy ... Steward remembered everything differently. Shouldn’t the clove be down in the tissue, not just sitting on top of the ham? And the chicken-fried steak – Vidalia onions or Spanish? (81).

Such musing may appear insignificant, yet it demonstrates one effect of military service. Dreaming of “down-home food” for three years causes Steward Morgan to idealise, fetishise, the culinary production of the townswomen. On his return the real meals cooked for him thus cannot meet his expectations. Steward remembers things differently and this influences, not only his criticism of food, but also the perception he has of the community. His absence “exaggerated the possibilities”, meaning that Haven, and then Ruby, can’t live up to his vision.

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<sup>18</sup> Morrison observes, “[m]any of these people think of themselves as Chosen and exceptional ... and the question becomes, ‘If you are chosen, does that not also require you to exclude other people?’ The basis of being selected is the rejection of others, and paradise itself is a gated place”. Toni Morrison, ‘A Conversation with Toni Morrison’, 1998, 21 April 2001, <<http://www.borders.com/features/ab99013.html>>

<sup>19</sup> Cyrus R. K. Patell, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p.139.

The Morgan twins' ideas of community can be traced back to their childhood memory of a tour of black towns made by the men of Haven. In a prosperous settlement they saw "nineteen Negro ladies arrange themselves on the steps of the town hall" (109). These 'refined' black women posing for a photograph captivated the boys with their "slender feet ... in thin leather shoes" and waists "not much bigger than their necks" (109). They "preened" in white and yellow dresses and their voices were "musical ... low, full of delight" (109). The scene remains a vivid recollection for the brothers even after the war: "Deek's image of the nineteen summertime ladies was unlike the photographer's. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal" (110). This exemplifies the idealised notion of black womanhood that the Morgans cherish. The memory is a celebration of the grace and beauty of the women, but it also constitutes a frozen vision to which the patriarchs hold everything else up. The "Negro ladies", both respectable and attractive, become paragons of what the twins think black women should be. Deacon's picture is as static as the photographer's, acknowledging only the part of the posers' lives presented on this one occasion. Still it is this image of womanhood that shapes the leaders' conception of Ruby: "Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting" (111). This idealised view of domesticity links the pastel Negro ladies with the town's orderly white and yellow homes. Black women are associated with an iconography akin to that of the Nineteenth Century 'angel in the house', a gender construction involving both the idolisation and regulation of female behaviour conventionally pertaining to white bourgeois women. This version of acceptable and desirable femininity, described by John Duvall as a "cult of true black womanhood", comes to define the patriarchs' notion of the whole community (and, as will be demonstrated, of what threatens it).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Steward sees it as "the vision that carried him and his brother through a war, that imbued their

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<sup>20</sup> John N. Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.142. Hence here the "African-American men's sense of identity parallels that of the patriarchal structures of middle-class white culture". Duvall, p.142.

marriages and strengthened their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish” (279).<sup>21</sup>

The utopia of Ruby is conceived as a place where black women are safe to walk at night. Unlike elsewhere in the U.S., here the townswomen can wander at will, knowing that there is no white threat, that “[n]othing for ninety miles around [thinks they are] prey” (8).<sup>22</sup> This is in some senses a very positive assertion. The notion of the town as an enclave of security, however, comes to have further implications. As Patell writes, “[t]his is a patriarch’s view of women’s freedom”.<sup>23</sup> To defend their families, to preserve their image of Negro ladies, the ex-soldiers set themselves up in the role of guardsmen. The town is described as “free and protected” yet this picture is dependent on exclusion, obedience and conformity (8). When there is dissent about the meaning of the communal oven, when young people want change in the 1970s, this is perceived as a threat to the New Fathers’ vision.<sup>24</sup> Hence the progressive Reverend Misner condemns Ruby as “some fortress you ... built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out” (213). And the patriarchs’ zealous safe-guarding of the town

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<sup>21</sup> This accords with Bammer’s commentary on utopias imagined by men: “women are not absent in male fantasies of utopia. On the contrary, they are central. Often when utopia is invoked, a vision of woman appears as if the two were metaphorically interchangeable ... From the perspective of male fantasies, the role of women has not been to change the world, but to inspire men to change it. Thus women abound in men’s utopias as projections of men’s desires; as authors of their own texts, they are rarely to be found”. Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.14.

<sup>22</sup> “[Ruby] neither had nor needed a jail ... A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed ... and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear ... She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things ... On out, beyond the limits of town, because nothing at the edge thought she was prey” (8-9). Central to the conception of Haven was its communal core, a shared necessity, meeting place and landmark bearing the founding fathers’ inscription, “a huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalised what they had done” (6-7). In 1949 the veterans reconstruct this oven in Ruby to pay homage to the vision of their ancestors. The Oven has a particular significance, however, in terms of the protection of women. This arises from a history of subjugation in America which meant many black women suffered sexual exploitation by white men. Originally the landmark of the Oven was built to celebrate the fact that the townswomen had escaped vulnerability to such abuse. In Oklahoma none of them would have to work in white houses and “[i]t was that thinking that made a community ‘kitchen’ so agreeable” (99). Yet by the time of the move to Ruby the Oven is no longer a functional cooking device, nor a sign of communal living. It has become only a monument to the safety that the “new fathers” believe they provide for their womenfolk (6). Indeed, some fear that it has become a “shrine” (103).

<sup>23</sup> Patell, p.183.

<sup>24</sup> As Patell points out, “[t]he virulent arguments over the exact wording and meaning of the motto on the Oven are a sign of how desperate the town fathers are to control the town’s official

eventually leads to an aggressive attack on defenceless women, the very figures the Old Fathers wanted to prevent from falling prey to white men. To the veterans “Ruby represents the best of all possible worlds for women, but clearly Morrison exposes ... the central unacknowledged contradiction of the male communal narrative that authorizes the hunting of women in the name of protecting womanhood”.<sup>25</sup>

The climactic assault on the neighbouring community known as the Convent (once a Catholic boarding school, now an informal women’s refuge) is anticipated by earlier acts of exclusion. Because the dark skinned founding families of Haven rejected outsiders, marrying only each other, the descendents of the town are a “[b]lue black people, tall and graceful” (193). They describe themselves as “eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines”, locating in their ‘pure’ blackness a sense of racial superiority (193). Military service is the one sanctioned activity that unavoidably brings town members into contact with other communities and during World War Two Roger Best meets and courts a light skinned African American woman. On being discharged he sends for the girl who’d had his child during the war, planning to take her with him to Ruby, yet she is greeted with contempt: “Only Steward had the gall to say out loud, ‘He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind’. Dovey shushed him ... Fairy DuPres cursed him ... But they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise” (201-2). The insularity and hostility towards difference of those whose ancestors were disallowed mean that they condemn a mother and her baby (figures they elsewhere claim to protect). The patriarchs see Roger’s bride as a contaminant, as someone who threatens the purity of their community, and he is thereafter despised “for marrying ... a wife of racial tampering” (197). The “good brave men” choose exclusion rather than inclusion. Fearing a dilution of 8-rock blood, the town leaders exhibit arrogant ethnic absolutism and later refuse to help when the outsider dies in childbirth. This move is repeated when, on his return from service in Vietnam, Menus Jury is persuaded not to marry a “sandy-haired girl from Virginia” (195). His seniors

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narrative: they conceive of the oven as a place for conversation but not debate, a place to share accepted narratives but not to propose new counternarratives”. Patell, p.181.

<sup>25</sup> Duvall, p.143.

“said she was more like a fast woman than a bride” and he “[c]hose ... to submit to his father’s rule” (278). The patriarchs’ laws to preserve their paradise hence involve, not only the protection of community, but also the rejection of persons with any racial variation. Infiltration, even by fellow blacks with some legacy of white blood, is perceived as detracting from the vision of Ruby that they cherish.

The contact with racial difference (and therefore anxiety about miscegenation) brought about by experience away in the military is illustrated in one further narrative episode. Here, however, the consternation at ‘mixing’ is not induced by women but by the violence of warfare. Tied up with Deacon Morgan’s rage that his sons have to be buried in bags because of their dismembered and incomplete condition, is a fear that white body parts might have been mixed in with their own because they belonged to integrated units.<sup>26</sup> His need to know if all the parts are black again points to the town’s preoccupation with “racial consistency”, to one of the reasons for the attack on the heterogeneous household of the Convent (112).

Before launching a violent assault the patriarchs demonise their female neighbours: “The women in the Convent were ... a flaunting parody of the nineteen Negro ladies of [Steward] and his brother’s youthful memory and perfect understanding. They were the degradation of that moment they’d shared of sunlit skin and verbena” (297). The Morgan twins’ perception of the runaway and refugee women clearly places them in opposition to their recollections of iconic femininity and the vision held for Ruby. With their “streetwalkers’ clothes and whores’ appetites” members of the Convent household form a “new obscene breed of female” that blasphemes against the veterans’ sacred notion of womanhood (297). When the order of things starts to unravel in Ruby, when dissent is voiced and change creeps in, the founders of the town turn to a group of outsiders for someone to blame, painting them as unnatural women, agents of contamination polluting their otherwise wholesome community. Indeed,

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<sup>26</sup> “Easter and Scout were in integrated units ... [but] whatever was missing, the parts were all of black men – which was a courtesy and a rule the medics tried hard to apply for fear of adding white thighs and feet to a black head ... [Deacon] did not want [Soane] even to imagine the single question he put ... Are all the parts black? Meaning, if not, get rid of the white pieces” (112).



Steward sees his neighbours as “a permanent threat to his cherished view of himself” (279).

The patriarchs, gathered at the Oven in a war cabinet, label the women “sluts” for their independent and ungodly way of life (276).<sup>27</sup> They twist the sanctuary that the Convent has offered to various troubled townspeople into a malevolent force of corruption. The women are condemned in terms of gender; lacking men their household must be immoral, but there is also a racial element to their demonisation. Although readers are not told which, one of the Convent inhabitants is white, three others are black and Connie, from South America, appears to be of mixed race.<sup>28</sup> The racially composite female community hence goes against all of the 8-rocks’ sensibilities about segregation and arouses their fears of being tainted: “If they stayed to themselves, that’d be something. But they don’t ... Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow” (276). The phrase “[d]rawing folks out there like flies to shit” echoes Steward’s vicious condemnation of Roger’s wife, “the dung we leaving behind”, and the perceived threat is that such “mess” will penetrate and disease the town (201 & 276).<sup>29</sup>

The patriarchs’ rhetoric ‘others’ the women, most of whom they have lived alongside for years, so that they may blame and attack them: “When the men spoke of the ruination that was upon them – how Ruby was changing in

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<sup>27</sup> “Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom ... These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in a church ... They don’t need men and they don’t need God” (276). The issue of godliness is something to which I will return in the second part of my chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Morrison deliberately obscures racial identity in *Paradise*, frustrating the reader’s expectations by not saying whether it is Mavis, Gigi, Pallas or Seneca who is white. She discusses “withholding racial markers ... so that the reader knew everything, or almost everything, about the characters, their interior lives, their past, their faults, their strengths, except that one small piece of information which was their race ... it was a way of saying that race is the least important piece of information we have about another person”. Toni Morrison, “Transcript”, 21 January 1998, 24 April 2001, <[www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html](http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/chattr012198.html)>. This perhaps relates to a similar experiment in a much earlier piece of writing, her short story ‘Recitatif’, in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African-American Literary Tradition*, ed. by Patricia Liggins Hill and Bernard W. Bell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), pp.1776-1786.

<sup>29</sup> One of the female elders of Ruby overhears the attackers preparing themselves with such rhetoric and muses, “[s]o ... the fangs and the tail are somewhere else. Out yonder all slithery in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose

intolerable ways – they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship ... They mapped defence instead and honed evidence for its need” (275).<sup>30</sup> The ex-soldiers perceive the Convent women as enemies and gather proof to justify their intended violence. Convinced of their rectitude and duty, “[l]ike bootcamp recruits, like invaders preparing for slaughter, they [meet] to rave, to heat the blood or turn it icicle cold the better to execute the mission” (280). Chillingly the veterans of Ruby act as if engaged in a military exercise, readying themselves for combat. Indeed, the twins’ “single-minded” attitude before a household of unarmed neighbours is linked to their frame of mind when joining up for service in World War Two (see 12). And after the men have shot down the woman who greets them at the Convent door, “[f]ondling their weapons, feeling suddenly ... young and good they are reminded that guns are more than decoration, intimidation or comfort. They are meant” (285). “The New Fathers ... are animated – warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness ... God at their side, [they] take aim. For Ruby” (18). Exhilarated and self righteous, they proceed to mow down the remaining women who run “like panicked does” from those who hunt them in the name of their town (and their sister, “Ruby. That sweet, modest laughing girl whom [Deacon] and Steward had protected all their lives”) (18 & 113). The men’s ruthless determination on a mission of aggression, their zeal for a violent purge of the ‘filth’ seeping into their homes, of course stands in stark contrast to the idealised image of a community where no one is thought of as prey.<sup>31</sup>

The story of Elder Morgan’s return from fighting in World War One can perhaps illuminate how the vision of Ruby has been corrupted, how the New

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themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven” (276). Lone DuPres hence perceives the way in which the men’s discourse projects all evil onto the outsiders.

<sup>30</sup> Morrison explains, “[t]hey would triumph because they would do the rejecting – the second generation. I don’t think that was true of the first generation in ... Haven”. But by the 1970s “tolerance had turned to anger and defence, because they were really threatened, not so much by the women, but by what was happening inside that town. They had no means to deal with post-war veterans and communicable sexual diseases and abortion, and all of these things were sort of seeping into this very clean, very pristine town”. Morrison, ‘A Conversation’.

<sup>31</sup> Morrison suggests, “[i]t was important that the men of the town were thinking how much they loved women as they went to assault the women in the convent ... Their mothers, their sisters ... Because they really believed that their role was the protection of women and children. So they couldn’t possibly be misogynists. But what does frighten them is the idea of women who don’t need men ... Of course what’s really going on is that the town can’t handle some of the

Fathers have become what they once opposed. In 1919 the twins' older brother disembarked at a port near New York City and, taking a walk around, "saw two men arguing with a woman":

From her clothes ... he guessed she was a streetwalking woman, and registering contempt for her trade, he felt at first a connection with the shouting men. Suddenly one of the men smashed the woman in her face with his fist ... Just as suddenly the scene slid from everyday color to black and white ... The two whitemen turned away from the unconscious Negro woman sprawled on the pavement (94).

Elder intercepted, fighting the white men, but when the police were called he fled. His account reveals an attitude markedly different from that of those attacking the Convent in 1976. Initially the soldier empathised with the men rebuking a prostitute, yet when they assaulted her the scene became racialised, involving "whitemen" and a "Negro woman". Elder's physical confrontation of whites was a very dangerous act for a uniformed African American at the time. And he thus ran, knowing the consequences if he awaited the law. Perhaps the poignancy and message of this story, however, lies in not the intervention of the black veteran, but the way in which he memorialises it.

Elder does not demonise the woman in New York, he instead berates himself for abandoning her: "He never got the sight of that whiteman's fist in that colored woman's face out of his mind. Whatever he felt about her trade, he thought about her, prayed for her until the end of his life ... He didn't excuse himself for running ... and didn't expect God to cut him any slack for it" (94-5). When his wife repairs his uniform (the symbol of his service for his country) he tells her to "remove the stitches, to let ... the buttons hang or remain missing" (94). He puts his bloodstained handkerchief away with his two medals, commemorating not his bravery in battle, not his pride as a black soldier, but the scene on his return from war illustrating the racial violence and oppression of the nation for which he has been fighting. Later Elder is buried as he wished, "in the uniform with its rips on display", in memory of the assaulted woman and what he views as his own failure to see the intervention through (94). Subsequent

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contemporary problems ... Vietnam veterans returning, women being restless". Toni Morrison, 'Black Pearls', with Katharine Viner, *The Guardian*, 24 March 1998, 2-5 (p.2).

perspectives offer insight into how attitudes have hardened in Ruby: “Steward liked that story, but it unnerved him to know it was based on the defence of ... a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own” (95). Steward is disturbed by his brother taking the part of a so-called streetwalker, he instead aligns himself with the censure and contempt exhibited by the white men. The step from Steward visualising his own attack on the prostitute in this story to the actual offensive against a group of condemned women in the Convent is not all that great. He sees no contradiction in simultaneous adoration of Negro ladies and hatred for the female outsiders. Elder perhaps would have.

According to Morrison, *Paradise* asks “[h]ow do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and become destructive, static, preformed – exactly what they were running from?”.<sup>32</sup> The assault on the Convent represents the final stage of the perversion of the original dream of Haven that is suggested by this question. Although the men claim to be protecting Ruby from contamination, the fact that the Oven, symbol of the founding ethos of the community, shifts during their mission surely indicates that the idea of the black town has been betrayed. Indeed, after the attack Deacon feels “remorse ... at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenceless, the different” (302). This realisation of the role he has played highlights how the Ruby patriarchs assumed the righteousness of those who enacted the original Disallowing and the supremacist rhetoric of the white oppressor.

The vision of an all black town in the West as a promised land, first held by ex-slaves then veterans facing a bleak postwar future, goes horribly awry. The 8-locks who relocate to Ruby believe strict separatism will solve all their problems. In fact, their new world is marred by repressive gender definitions and increasingly authoritarian government in the face of dissent: “They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them” (306). Patriarchal and high-minded leaders demonise and scapegoat a neighbouring

female community, becoming mirrors of what their forefathers sought to leave behind. This culminates in a violent offensive as the ex-soldiers try to wipe out the difference perceived to threaten their haven. Through such developments *Paradise* explores how a previously persecuted group can become like their historical oppressors. How African America occupies a space within (and without) the value-systems of white America: “They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him” (306). It is this aligning of communities that explains why, despite their choice of isolation, the men of Ruby serve in the U.S. military. For the call to enlist and protect your nation appeals to the very same principles that the townsmen live by: defence of the space claimed as home, cultural superiority, manly fortitude, civic duty and vigilance against those who bring group identity into question.

Using Ruby and its disallowance of ‘others’, a “hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange”, Morrison’s novel examines how units of belonging, paradises are shaped (306). The utopian vision of the Founding Fathers is betrayed when their male descendents become destructive, fixed in beliefs that bear a disturbing resemblance to dominant national ideology. The patriarchs’ entrenched position as guardsmen of a narrowly conceived version of domestic and community life, their inability, “deafened by the roar of [their] own history”, to accept change, causes the dream to implode (306). Morrison hence explores what happens when difference and fear of contamination is used to justify aggression, when ‘home’ is delineated in terms of exclusion and conformity. It is in this dynamic perhaps that we find the critique lacking in the text’s depiction of Vietnam? As already discussed, the author fails to engage directly with the politics of American militarism. Yet *Paradise* is littered with the losses and ramifications felt by an African American community as a result of U.S. conflicts, and in the allegorical tale of the town of Ruby and its neighbours some larger issues are grappled with. The campaign of maligning, and then obliterating, the Convent women comes, above all, to reveal the danger of assuming an imperialist position and the devastating effect of violence enacted along such lines. In the end “[*Paradise*]’s projection of a social

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<sup>32</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Paradise Found: A Talk with Toni Morrison’, with A. J. Verdelle, *Essence*, 28,

utopia” can be seen to “arise from its confrontation with and reversal of the male-dominated [racially absolute] bourgeois social model”.<sup>33</sup>

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10 (1998), 78-80 (p.78).

<sup>33</sup> Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p.107. Willis, although writing prior to the publication of *Paradise*, identifies at least some of the utopian impulses delineated in Morrison’s fiction. See also my ensuing discussion of the author’s projection of alternatives to the paradigm of Ruby.

## II. A New World Religion?: Creolisation and Candomblé

In addition to detailing the corruption of a black utopian dream, *Paradise* explores various forms of religious worship, concluding with the conception of an alternative paradise. I will next investigate Morrison's proposition of "organised religion and unorganised magic as two systems" within the text, examining how this facilitates an engagement with black diaspora culture as a whole.<sup>34</sup> Reinforcing my earlier discussion of what happens to Ruby, of the townspeople the author comments, "religious fervor and devotion is in the main, a solace, a guide, a kind of protection against sin and evil, but it can freeze and become arrogant and prideful and ungenerous, and ... all religions and all people are vulnerable to that".<sup>35</sup> Yet in *Paradise*, as Bouson points out, "Morrison [particularly] focuses on ... the complex religious heritage of blacks in America".<sup>36</sup> Other novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* raise issues of faith and healing, depicting, for example, Hagar's funeral and Baby Suggs' preaching. Such instances of collective mourning, celebration or even exorcism anticipate the author's later, more sustained consideration of church organisations and theologies. My contention here is that *Paradise* invokes the African Brazilian religious practices of Candomblé to offer a positive model of New World creolisation, to further its portrayal of the cultures emergent from slavery.

Institutional religion is explored partly through the three different Protestant churches of Ruby.<sup>37</sup> The opposing theological and political positions of the authoritarian Methodist, Reverend Pulliam, and the young and progressive Baptist, Reverend Misner, enable Morrison's depiction of the town's insularity and conservatism. Whilst the newcomer, Misner seeks to end Ruby's isolation,

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<sup>34</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Morrison's Slice of Paradise', with Deirdre Donahue, 8 January 1998, 21 April 2001, <<http://www.ustoday.com/life/enter/books/b128.htm>>

<sup>35</sup> Morrison, 'A Conversation'.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks J. Bouson, *Quiet as it's kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p.193.

<sup>37</sup> The author characterises Oklahoma, the novel's setting, thus: "You know you have liquor stores in Washington and banks in New York ... Well in Oklahoma there are churches". "It's a great place for religion ... There are churches everywhere ... two or three in a block, or just a large parking lot in the middle of no where and a nice church that people will go long distances to

affirming links with the Civil Rights struggle and supporting Pan-African causes, Pulliam condemns such activism and views the disruption rocking the rest of American society as apocalyptic.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Pulliam's "boiling breath" approach is associated with the Old Testament as he asserts that God is "interested only in Himself" and that worshippers must realise this before "the moment when all are judged for the disposition of their eternal lives" (141-3). In contrast, Misner believes in a benevolent God who is profoundly interested in his followers and can move "you to do your own work as well as His" (142). His emphasis on the self-sacrifice of Christ, rather than God's "begrudging authority", is allied with the New Testament (146).<sup>39</sup> Whilst Pulliam upholds the inscription on the town's communal oven as a divine command to obedience, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow", Misner encourages the community's young people to question traditional narratives and reinterpret it as a call to action, "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (86-7). Such efforts throw into relief the intransigence of the majority of all three of Ruby's congregations.

The religion of the townspeople, described as "protective, God-loving, thrifty but not miserly", contributes to their sense of moral superiority as the righteous descendants of the Disallowed (160). Indeed, the journey West of their forefathers in search of a promised land is allied with the biblical story of Exodus. This appropriation of the tale of the Israelites' quest for freedom and Canaan echoes a wider tradition within black churches which found in it an empowering model. According to Raboteau, "[n]o single symbol captures more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of

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attend. In the little town of the novel there are three churches: a Methodist, a Baptist, and a Pentecostal". Morrison, 'Blacks, Modernism and the American South', p.14.

<sup>38</sup> The ministers' sermons during the 1960s and 70s when "anger smallpoxed other places", illustrate their differences: "Evil Times, said Reverend Pulliam ... Last Days, said Pastor Cary ... the new preacher ... said Good News: 'I will vanquish thine enemies before thine eyes', saith the Lord, Lord, Lord" (102).

<sup>39</sup> He contemplates the cross as the "mark of a standing human figure poised to embrace ... Without this sign, the believer's life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits were interest due on a debt that could never be paid ... But with it, in the religion in which this sign was paramount and foundational, well, life was a whole other matter" (146). Morrison has described Pulliam's as "the Old Testament 'Christ as Judge' very fundamentalist, puritan posture. The whole business of being a citizen in God's community as a test ... very stern". But "the progressive minister, who has had experience in the Civil Rights Movement, dislikes that intensely, and thinks of his religion, and the religion he wants to preach, as kinder, more open, more individualistic, less punishing ... so he's in direct confrontation with the kinds of ministers who had flourished in Ruby". Morrison, 'A Conversation'.



Exodus".<sup>40</sup> "Used primarily to foster internal resistance among the slaves, the Exodus story contradicted the white Christian claim that Africans were intended by God to be slaves".<sup>41</sup> The Protestants of Ruby are hence located within a context of the evolution of specifically African American forms of Christianity. Yet their separatism and conservatism render this a hollow relation.

The alliance of the Morgan brothers with a judgemental sense of Christian morality, in addition, implicates institutional religion in their pride, avarice and oppressive authority. Deacon and Steward practice an expedient and selective form of faith, attending Calvary because "the Baptists [are] the largest congregation in town as well as the most powerful", and sorting "Misner's opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey" (56-7). As the narrative develops their Protestantism is increasingly associated with material greed rather than religious devotion.<sup>42</sup> The original story of Haven is one of the founding of a close and mutually supportive community (see 108-9).<sup>43</sup> Yet in Ruby that spirit of cooperation has dissipated: the bank is no longer owned collectively, struggling businesses are not assisted only loaned more money, and social inequality has widened, the Morgan twins in particular accumulating wealth and therefore political clout within the town. Although Deacon and Steward view themselves as righteous Christians, the problematical character of their position is exposed when Dovey wonders, "aside from giving up his wealth, can a rich man be a good one?" (93). Instead of humility the brothers exhibit pride, behaving "as if God were their silent business partner" (143). Indeed, they view their prosperity as a sign of divine approbation, the failure of other black towns as deserved, "remark[ing] on the mystery of God's justice" (109). Such religious sanctimony,

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<sup>40</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.9.

<sup>41</sup> Bouson, p.238.

<sup>42</sup> Morrison's description of the biblical inspiration for the town's planning reveals their financial control: "The four side streets east of Central were named after the Gospels ... Later on, as Ruby grew, streets were laid on the west side of Central, and although these newer streets were continuations of those on the east ... they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the east became Cross John on the west. St. Luke became Cross Luke. The sanity of this pleased most everybody, Deek especially, and there was always room for additional houses (*financed, if need be, by the Morgan brothers' bank*)" [my emphasis] (114).

<sup>43</sup> "Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their journey to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing, were vigilant to any need or shortage" (109).

however, is undercut by the narrative's detailing of their censorious banking decisions and personal avarice. For example, when Misner forms a non-profit "credit union ... small emergency loans to church members; no penalty payback schemes", this aid organisation is viewed with suspicion by Steward (56). Forgetting the founding ethos of Haven, he speculates "[a] man like that, willing to throw money away, could give customers ideas. Make them think there was a choice about interest rates" (56). Morrison hence demonstrates how the religious can "become arrogant and ... ungenerous".<sup>44</sup> As I will explore later, the forms of worship that *Paradise* affirms operate quite differently.

Reverend Misner's own faith offers an alternative to the Morgans' self-serving Christianity. Indeed, he conceives of a black Christ whose agents are the activists of contemporary America.<sup>45</sup> He envisages the Crucifixion as the "official murder" of a "woolly-head[ed]" man with "midnight skin", so repudiating the iconography of the white Christian Church (146). Misner also argues that wider black affiliations are key to the struggle against racist oppression: "we live in ... [t]he whole world. Separating us, isolating us – that's always been their weapon" (210). This conviction is linked to his notion of "Africa ... roots", revealed when he asks of the townspeople,

can't you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home ... Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get ... Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organised knowledge ... on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good! – there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died ... That place. Who was God talking to if not to my people living in my home? (209-13).

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<sup>44</sup> Morrison, 'A Conversation'.

<sup>45</sup> "His instrument, His justice. As a race ... If we follow His commandments, we'll be His voice, His retribution. As a people" (87). A real life contemporary of Misner writes, "[t]he appearance of Jesus as the Black Christ ... means that the Black Revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America". James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p.220.

This vision of belonging, of an original home, exposes the hegemonic displacements of colonisation and slavery. It poses a worldly paradise rather than a deferred heaven, and echoes the Christian creation story, possibly making reference to Africa as the point of genesis for humankind. Misner's lyrical celebration, however, mythologises Africa and perhaps also betrays an idealistic impulse towards return. Indeed, Patricia Best responds by asking "is it just some kind of past with no slavery in it you're looking for? ... Slavery *is* our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa" (210).<sup>46</sup> Although he is presented as a largely sympathetic character, the inclusion of such criticism within the narrative works to puncture the romanticism of Misner's dream. Whilst the preacher's militancy and Pan-Africanism appear empowering in comparison to the insularity and conservatism of Ruby, the reader is prompted to question the usefulness of Africa, "a foreign country", for African Americans (210). Indeed, the seduction of reversing the dislocations of the black diaspora is undermined.

"CHRIST THE KING SCHOOL FOR NATIVE GIRLS", otherwise known as the Convent, provides an alternative example of institutional religion to the churches of Ruby (224). Just as the Morgans' Protestantism is allied with pride and greed, however, so Catholicism is problematised through its association with colonisation. When founded the Convent was envisaged as a pioneer outpost battling savagery, intended "to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption" (227). The establishment of a school to re-educate Native Americans in Oklahoma during the 1920s illustrates the missionary project of organised religion. Christ the King attempted to assimilate its wards to European American ways of life and Christian worship. Morrison's narrative implicitly condemns this ambition as imperialist, commenting satirically on "the privilege" of knowing a monotheistic God and the assumption that Natives are primitive, lacking cosmologies and civilisations of their own. This point is

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<sup>46</sup> She continues, "I just don't believe some stupid devotion to a foreign country – and Africa is a foreign country, in fact it's fifty foreign countries – is a solution for these kids ... You want some

furthered by the story of Connie, an orphan rescued from Brazilian “street garbage” by Mary Magna (223). The presence of Catholic “Sisters Devoted to Indian and Colored People” in South America recalls the connection between religion and European colonisation of the New World (223). And although Connie accompanies the nuns gratefully, *Paradise* reveals the devotion of the next thirty years of her life to the Church to be alienating rather than rewarding.

The Convent, like Ruby, is also delineated as a space of patriarchal oppression. Moving into an “embezzler’s folly”, to create their school the Sisters sought to eradicate the decorative erotica betraying the building’s former function: “The embezzler’s joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room, which the nuns converted to a schoolroom, where stilled Arapaho girls ... sat and learned to forget” (4). The licentious ornamentation, as representative of sensuality, not spiritual love, required repression. Here Catholicism’s emphasis on maintaining moral propriety, training women to chaste lives, divorcing religion from corporeality and enforcing censorship, is explored. Yet although “[t]he Sisters of the Sacred Cross chipped away all the nymphs ... curves of their marble hair still strangle grape leaves and tease the fruit” around niches housing “Christ and his mother” (4).<sup>47</sup> This unusual juxtaposition is suggestive for my examination of later developments at the Convent. In addition, despite their prudishness about the house built for pleasure, Morrison reveals the nuns to be accompanied by Christian imagery that is not so very different from the condemned erotica. Whilst the mansion’s “alabaster vagina” ashtrays may be lurid, equally so is the religious picture of “Saint Catherine of Siena” (72-4). This etching of “[a] woman. On her knees. A knocked-down look, cast-up begging eyes ... pudding tits exposed on a plate”, is illustrative of the damaging gender ideology implicit in Catholic teachings (74). It exposes how although the

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foreign Negroes to identify with, why not South America? Or Germany, for that matter. They have some brown babies over there you could have a good time connecting with” (210).

<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere the narrative identifies other “traces of the sisters’ failed industry. The female-torso candleholders in the candelabra hanging from the hall ceiling ... The nursing cherubim emerging from layers of paint in the foyer. The nipple-tipped doorknobs” (72). As Tally observes, “[i]n spite of the nuns’ diligent efforts to erase the signs of libertinism and turn the embezzler’s folly into a Convent, the sensuousness of nymphs and sirens will not be suppressed”. Tally, p.77. To the first of the institution’s wards, “the house was like a castle, full of a beauty Mary Magna said had to be eliminated at once. Consolata’s first tasks were to smash offending marble figures and

nuns achieve a degree of independence from patriarchy in their remote all-female household, tied up with their religion is the figure of woman as abject supplicant, self-sacrifice, and a disturbing iconography of mutilated bodies.

Mary Magna's adoptee, Connie, welcomed the order and ceremony of Convent life, quickly learning "the gorgeous language made especially for talking to heaven" and the virtue of patience (224).<sup>48</sup> "The lesson held [her] in good stead, and she hardly noticed the things she was losing. The first to go were the rudiments of her first language" (242). Thus the orphan's conversion was accompanied by the erosion of her native tongue of Portuguese and presumably, in addition, her memories of home. Later when Mary Magna dies she is also left with "no identification, no insurance, no family, no work ... They had promised to take care of her always but did not tell her that always was not all ways nor forever" (247-8). Consolata's deracination and personal sense of loss lead her to question her faith and the rewards promised by the Catholic Church for her years of labour and devotion.<sup>49</sup> This crisis engenders a turn towards alternative forms of worship, enabling Morrison to explore "uninstitutional religion".<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Connie synthesises different beliefs to forge her own faith, in particular rejecting Catholicism's elevation of the spiritual and corresponding denial of the fleshly. When she exchanged chastity for a passionate affair with Deacon Morgan, letting "the feathers ... come unstuck from the walls of a stone-cold womb", Consolata had recognised the Church's repression of the bodily (229). Her "thirty years of surrender to the living God [had] cracked like a pullet's egg when she met the living man" (225). Yet she found her relationship with the townsman to be as problematic as her former piety, "a simple mindless transfer. From Christ, to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a

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tend bonfires of books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out of the fire and had to be chased back to the flame" (225).

<sup>48</sup> "After arranging for her confirmation, [Mary Magna] had taken the young Consolata aside and together they would watch coffee brew or sit in silence at the edge of the garden" (242). "For thirty years she offered her body and her soul to God's Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself. To her of the bleeding heart and bottomless love. To her quae sine tactu pudoris. To the beata viscera Mariae Virginis ... To him whose love was so perfectly available it dumbfounded wise men and the damned" (225).

<sup>49</sup> She asks of Mary Magna and her God, "[w]here is the rest of days, the aisle of thyme, the scent of veronica you promised? The cream and honey you said I had earned? ... the serenity duty grants us, the blessings of good works?" (251).

living man” (240). Indeed, she equated her desire for Deacon, manifested when she bit his lip, with devotion to Jesus and the consumption of a transubstantiated body in Holy Communion.<sup>51</sup> It is only when she rejects the binary opposition of corporeality and spirituality that her dissatisfaction can be overcome.

Consolata’s attraction to Deacon, however, is also linked to the issue of her cultural orphanhood or dislocation. Indeed, what she recognised and sought to find in him was something of the home that she was taken from by the Church: “She ... bent the knees she had been so happy to open and said, ‘Dear Lord, I didn’t want to eat him. I just wanted to go home’” (240). This longing for a different cultural connection indicates her deracination. The moment when Connie was first reminded of Brazil by the festivities of Ruby reveals the sensuality, physicality and “reckless joy” that she associates with her home and, by extension, other African Americans:

she heard a faint but insistent Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Then a memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly it was fruitless to decipher how such ease was possible ... although they were living here in a hamlet, not in a loud city full of glittering black people, Consolata knew she knew them (226).

Identifying with the townspeople and the pleasure they take in their holiday, their bodily ease and exuberance, Connie had embarked on an affair related to her homesickness for a city of “glittering black people”. Unable to explain this longing to Mary Magna, “Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha, she wanted to say, meaning, he and I are the same”, she recognised a common bond, perhaps one shared by those displaced throughout the black diaspora (241).<sup>52</sup> The use of “Sha sha sha” in the text signals the kind of gratification or physical celebration missing from

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<sup>50</sup> Morrison quoted by Dinitia Smith, “Toni Morrison’s Mix of Tragedy, Domesticity and Folklore”, *New York Times*, 8 January 1998, E1.

<sup>51</sup> He had recoiled from the “woman bent on eating him like a meal”, seeing her as a “Salomé from whom he had escaped just in time” (239 & 280). Deacon’s Protestantism, like Mary Magna’s Catholicism, hence requires sexual passivity or renunciation, rather than carnality from women.

<sup>52</sup> As Matus points out, “[t]he South American Consolata shares with African Americans a heritage from the era of slavery – a heritage that one day makes itself conscious when she sees some of the men of Ruby”. This common heritage works to “shatter the narrow and exclusive notions of blackness to which the citizens of Ruby subscribe”. Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.158.

her life at the Convent, something found only when she reinvents her religion to encompass beliefs and practices from outside of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Although Ruby's churches are largely associated with conservatism and orthodoxy, festivities like those at the founding of the town described above reveal the influence of an alternative cosmology. Indeed, within the community the character of Lone DuPres possesses an unconventional religious faith that combines knowledge gained as a midwife and healer with institutional Protestantism. Occupying a liminal social position because of her ability to "read minds" (viewed as ungodly) and her vocation ("[m]en scared of us"), Lone nevertheless informs Consolata's development of a new kind of worship (272). She espouses a theology that rejects the division of the earthly from the spiritual, cautioning her apprentice "[y]ou need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all" (244). Conceiving of "His works" holistically, Lone reads and draws on the natural world, telling Connie "[l]et your mind grow long and use what God gives you" (246).

The Convent woman's "religious habits [are] entrenched", however, and she fears that Lone's activities constitute "magic" (244). Eventually persuaded to use her own healing powers, Consolata saves Soane and Deacon's son, following directions to "[g]o inside him. Wake him up ... Just step on in" (245). She feels shame at this "devilment" yet "practice[s]" again later to keep Mary Magna alive (246-7).

Troubling as it was, yoking the sin of pride to witchcraft, she came to terms with it in a way she persuaded herself would not offend Him or place her soul in peril. It was a question of language. Lone called it 'stepping in'. Consolata said it was 'seeing in'. Thus the gift was 'in sight'. Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it (247).

Wary of damning herself, Connie circumvents the Church's prohibitions by bending the rules. By naming her gift "in sight" she is able to redefine her healing as not an act of intrusive entry or possession, but one of vision and perception. This manipulation of language allows her to negotiate doctrine whilst utilising her abilities, a step indicative of the reinventions to come. Her employment of the term "in sight" is particularly interesting, suggesting notions

of truth and seeing connected to Enlightenment thought. Connie hence names her powers in a way that makes them acceptable in terms of orthodox theology, distancing herself from the associations with paganism that might accompany “stepping in”.<sup>53</sup>

It is when, however, Consolata leads the women who have sought refuge at the Convent on a journey of discovery and healing that religious life is truly re-envisioned. Her mission is inspired by an unusual visitation that introduces to the text the idea of syncretic forms of worship. Approached in the Convent garden by a stranger, Connie finds his mysterious behaviour to indicate that he is a divine messenger (see 252). Although he wears everyday clothes and sunglasses, his conversation suggests that there is a higher purpose to his visit. Morrison’s narrative deliberately leaves his exact status ambiguous: he could be a revelation of God in the person of Jesus for, evoking the newly resurrected Christ, he intimates that his hostess should know him, or alternatively he could be a different deity altogether, a divine trickster / mediator calling on Connie to reinvent herself. The latter possibility is strengthened by his attitude: he is playful, “flirtatious, full of secret fun” rather than pious or commanding (252). His “[f]resh, tea-colored hair” and eyes “as round and green as new apples”, in addition, offer a mirror image of Consolata herself (252). All this makes him a somewhat intriguing envoy, perhaps the representative of an unorthodox pantheon.<sup>54</sup> The distinctive pattern of the visitor’s speech is also significant as

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<sup>53</sup> Her gift of vision, however, is accompanied by a gradual loss of real sight: “her eyes drained of what eyes were made for” until “she saw nothing clearly except what took place in the minds of others” (248). She believes this to be God’s will: “a sunshot seared her right eye, announcing the beginning of her bat vision ... Consolata had been spoken to” (241). “[H]alf cursed, half blessed. He had burned the green away and replaced it with pure sight that damned her if she used it” (248). This act of God is reminiscent of the biblical sun shot that struck Paul at the moment of his conversion.

<sup>54</sup> According to Bouson, “[h]er guardian deity or ancestral guide, the young and seductive man, who like Consolata has green eyes and tea-colored hair, represents the core part of Consolata’s identity – the deity within or beloved part of the self”. Bouson, p.209. However, his depiction perhaps rather suggests that he is modelled on Esu Elegbara, one of the orisha gods of an African Brazilian belief system drawn on by Morrison in *Paradise*. Raboteau writes, “[p]rominent among the African orisha and vodun of candomblé [is] Eshu (Legba), messenger of the gods ... divine trickster”. Raboteau, p.19. This figure is also referred to by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*. “Of the music, myths, and forms of performance that the African brought to the Western Hemisphere” Gates chooses “one specific trickster figure that recurs with startling frequency in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America” to unify his investigation of black literary tradition, vernacular and the double-voiced. This is “the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara”, associated with mediation, ambiguity,



the standard constructions of American English are not followed. His phrases, “I’m far country. Got a thing to drink? ... I don’t want see your girls. I want see you”, echo Consolata’s own whilst she was losing her Portuguese: “Every now and then she found herself speaking and thinking in that in-between place, the valley between the regulations of the first language and the vocabulary of the second” (252 & 242). The messenger uses grammatical forms that she recognises and is drawn to “like honey oozing from a comb” (252). Indeed, Connie starts to reply in the same manner, “[l]ook you in the house”, her new mode of speech revealing a mixture of cultural influence (252).<sup>55</sup> The suggestion of South American survivals here anticipates the emergence of a religion informed by Consolata’s Brazilian heritage. Certainly this episode triggers her personal transformation into “a new and revised Reverend Mother” as afterwards she grows “straight-backed and handsome” and offers the Convent women an alternative vision of redemption (265-6).

Connie’s reinvention begins with a ceremonial meal at which she announces to the women “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for ... stay here and follow me. Someone could want to meet you” (262). Her educative and healing mission is hence initiated by an act of self naming and an assumption of authority.<sup>56</sup> The runaways who now occupy the former school are described as “broken girls”, haunted by troubled pasts and lacking direction (222).<sup>57</sup> It is the prospect of these lives without purpose or fulfilment that prompts Connie to take command. Although concerned with discipline and soul saving, her project is very different to that of the nuns who previously ran the

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sexuality, humour and double-voicedness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.4-5. In Morrison’s allusion the trickster reflects Connie’s own mixed race appearance and surely reminds her of her South American cultural heritage.

<sup>55</sup> This shift is also evident in her speech to the Convent women. For example, “[m]y child body, hurt and soil”, “I agreed her”, “so I wondering” (263).

<sup>56</sup> Tally describes the phrase “I call myself Consolata Sosa” as “at once the voice and the inscription of self-affirmation”. Tally, p.42. Her position has been likened to that of a *mãe-de-santo*, or mother-of-saints in a *terreiro* or temple of Candomblé. See Bouson, p.239. This figure “represents the principal line of communication between the material world of mortals and the spiritual world of the deities”. Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine and Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p.63.

Convent. Indeed, a new form of worship is hinted at in the meal that she prepares to stimulate the senses and satisfy bodily needs.<sup>58</sup>

Consolata sets forth her revised belief system more explicitly in a speech condemning the separation of the material and the spiritual:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again ... When her body sickens ... I hold it ... enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man ... So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? ... Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve (263).

This oration charts Consolata's rescue as a child, her affair with Deacon and her use of "in sight" to keep Mary Magna alive. The Catholic exaltation of the eternal soul is problematised for its concomitant denial of the mortal body made her "flesh ... so hungry for itself" that her desire became all-consuming. From her experiences Connie concludes that too often "bones", our physical lives and interactions, are divorced from spirituality. This issue has significance in terms of the history of African American oppression. For, by separating the material and spiritual spheres, slave owners could promise heavenly fulfilment after death for those slaves who uncomplainingly endured hardship and suffering in the present. Indeed, African American theologies are thought to have evolved in resistance to such divisions.<sup>59</sup> The binary of the corporeal and the spiritual has

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<sup>57</sup> "[T]he timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and ... drift. The three *ds* that paved the road to perdition ... Consolata ... saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying ... Instead of plans they had wishes – foolish baby girl wishes" (221-2).

<sup>58</sup> Morrison's narrative charts the stages of Connie's culinary preparation in lyrical detail, the text shifting between brief portraits of each of the refugees and passages devoted to the reverential production of food in the kitchen (see 252-262).

<sup>59</sup> Erskine writes, "Black and Decolonising theologies contend that Black religion ... refused to ape European norms in dividing the world into the material and spiritual spheres. This division was one way in which the master sought to control Black people, by using missionary theology to instil in them the notion that the economic order was preparatory for the spiritual world which one could access only through death ... [Black Christians] claimed that the world in which slaves were brutalized and sought to make sense of their suffering ... was the world in which they experienced the presence of the divine through the working of the spirit". Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), p.xvi.

also played an important role in shaping gender ideology. As Lucy Sargisson outlines, “within the contexts of Western philosophical and theological traditions, the establishment of a dichotomy between spirit and matter is related to other dualistic pairs: mind / body, deity / man, rationality / passion ... and, finally, man / woman. As is the case with other dichotomous pairings ... the relation is hierarchical”. Hence in patriarchal Christianity “[w]oman, as represented by Eve, is commonly seen to be the embodiment of the privation or absence of spirit. Woman is pure (or rather impure) matter”.<sup>60</sup> This association engenders degradation, but also demonisation of the kind illustrated by the men of Ruby.

Consolata frames her teachings using the archetypal figures of Mary and Eve. She refuses the polarisation of these two representatives of female identity that conventionally positions Eve as the corrupter of Adam, responsible for his expulsion from Eden, and Mary as the immaculate vessel who facilitated the salvation of mankind, elevated by God and revered for her perfect love. In her seminal examination of the cult of the Virgin Mary, *Alone of All Her Sex*, Marina Warner writes that for the patriarchal Church “woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind”.<sup>61</sup> Descended from Eve and cursed with childbirth, women are allied with the material or corporeal, Mary alone being associated with the spiritual and so providing a model to which everyone else should aspire.<sup>62</sup> By asserting “Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve”, Consolata presents an alternative and matrilineal holy family, her message being that one figure should not take prescience over the other. She thus, as Reames identifies, “insists on the union of the two parts into which woman has been divided in Western culture: the

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Baby Suggs’ preaching in *Beloved* asserts that “the prize”, God’s grace, is found through self love and the affirmation of black flesh (89).

<sup>60</sup> Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.134.

<sup>61</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976), p.58.

<sup>62</sup> “[T]he Virgin is a protagonist in the drama of the Incarnation and the Redemption of Christ, and consequently in the personal salvation of each individual who ... professes Christian beliefs”. Warner, p.xxiii. Warner refers to the “great vault thrown over the history of Western attitudes to women, the whole mighty span resting on Eve the temptress on one side, and Mary the paragon on the other”. Warner, p.60.

sinning flesh and the immaculate soul”.<sup>63</sup> The new belief system of which Connie conceives is, I suggest, informed by both her training in Catholicism and her memory of cultures evolved by slaves in South America. Her religious imaginary challenges the gender ideology, the denial of the bodily, and the promises of deferred fulfilment in heaven of the established church. Morrison hence explores a range of engagements with Christianity in the black diaspora.

The starting point for Consolata’s ministry is not the word of God, but rather a representation of the body: “*In the beginning* the most important thing was the template” [my emphasis] (263). She has the women create self portraits on the cellar floor, connecting this image making with the exchange of their stories in a “loud dreaming” (264).<sup>64</sup> “[T]hey step easily into the dreamer’s tale”, accompanying Mavis shopping whilst her twin babies suffocate in the car, feeling the terror of Pallas swimming to escape rapists and a treacherous mother, negotiating the tear gas and violence of a Detroit street protest along with Gigi and enduring abandonment and prostitution with Seneca (264). Each experience shared is met with “murmurs of love” so that past guilt and recrimination is “undone” (264).

The templates drew them like magnets ... They understood and began to begin. First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears and head hair. Seneca duplicated in robin’s egg blue one of her more elegant scars ... Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor ... Gigi drew a heart locket around her body’s throat ... said it was a gift from her father which she had thrown in the Gulf of Mexico ... Pallas had put a baby in her template’s stomach. When asked who the father was, she said nothing but drew next to the baby a woman’s face with ... a crooked fluffy mouth ... days passed uncut from night as careful

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<sup>63</sup> Kelly Reames, *Toni Morrison’s Paradise: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p.57. Peach links the rejection of “the body/soul dualism” to a “neo-pagan model of witchcraft”. “From a feminist perspective, witchcraft runs counter to Judaeo-Christian tradition which in its iconicising of a passive, asexual virgin and a virgin birth can be seen as denying the female body, denying women their sexuality, and disallowing women their divinity. Connie, as Consolata Sosa, urging the women not to accept the body/spirit dualism that inevitably privileges one over the other, recommends a female rather than a male Biblical narrative ... ‘Eve is Mary’s daughter’”. Peach, p.160.

<sup>64</sup> The “dreaming” is perhaps meant to be evocative of the Australian aboriginal alcheringa or sacred dreamtime?

etchings of body parts and memorabilia occupied them. Yellow barrettes, red peonies ... Rose of Sharon petals, Lorna Doones (265).

The women create personal histories, their self-representations exorcising what haunts them. As the templates develop, signs of healing become evident. For example, instead of self-harming, Seneca starts to mark her cellar "silhouette" (263).<sup>65</sup> The "memorabilia" they draw emblematises key memories, "red peonies", for instance, being a reference to Gigi's witness of the shooting of a black boy during street unrest, blood blooming through his white shirt, whilst "Lorna Doones" were the treats left for Seneca by her fleeing sister (mother?). This process of self inscription enables rejuvenation: "They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (254). Awakened to their own physicality and sensuality, affirming the inseparability of material and spiritual well being, the women soon have a "markedly different look in [their] eyes" (265). Indeed, something is "missing: unlike some people in Ruby, [they] are no longer haunted" (266). Connie's household hence rejects the patient acceptance and the repression of the flesh taught by Mary Magna. It also declines the self serving religious sanctimony of the Morgans. Instead the women celebrate their "moving bodies" and reconciled souls, becoming "bodacious black [and white] Eves unredeemed by Mary" (18).

The syncretic nature of the beliefs of Consolata and her followers is revealed when they dance in a fall of much "longed for rain":

they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces ... In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain. They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep ... Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in State housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of rose of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away ... all fear of black water. Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden, was the more furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant ... Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby's head, swayed like a frond (283).

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<sup>65</sup> As Tally notes, "[u]nable to articulate her loss and her profound sense of unworthiness, Seneca inscribes her pain on her own body, a sign of her self-loathing". Tally, p.42.

This lyrical passage depicts the women, now described as “holy”, participating in a sensual ritual that permits the renunciation of their traumatic pasts. Indeed, their shaved heads suggest renewal and rebirth, the balm of rain an anointing. The dance is a celebration both physical and spiritual and so accords with Consolata’s rejection of Catholic doctrine. The reference to her visitor as a “god”, in addition, reinforces my identification of him with a deity from an alternative pantheon. Indeed, his characteristics are suggestive of an orisha of the African Brazilian religion Candomblé.<sup>66</sup> African influenced forms of worship are also evoked by the ecstatic dance itself.<sup>67</sup> And, as Bouson observes, “[t]he initiation of the Convent women by Consolata ... recalls the initiation rites of Candomblé. During the Candomblé initiation, the initiates['] ... heads are shaved ... they are given new names; they learn the songs and dances of their particular *orixás*; and when they are prepared to receive the god, they dance to induce a trancelike state of possession”.<sup>68</sup> Similarities between the practices of the Convent and those of Candomblé would hence seem to indicate that Morrison’s narrative draws on South American religious culture to further its depiction of spirituality and to situate itself within the wider black diaspora.<sup>69</sup>

Consolata’s distinctive vision of paradise also perhaps alludes to Brazil:

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<sup>66</sup> Morrison’s discussion of the original inspiration for *Paradise* corroborates my proposition that she makes reference to African Brazilian religion. “On a trip to Brazil in the 1980s, Ms. Morrison heard about a convent of black nuns who took in abandoned children and practised candomble ... the local populace considered them an outrage, and they were murdered by a posse of men. ‘I’ve since learned it never happened ... But for me it was irrelevant. And it said much about institutional religion and uninstitutional religion, how close they are’”. Morrison quoted by Smith, E1. The New World religion of Candomblé evolved from “a set of beliefs, practices, and cosmology introduced by Yoruba slaves and freedmen”. Voeks, p.51. See my previous footnote on Esu Elegbara.

<sup>67</sup> In West Africa “[d]ancing, drumming, and singing play a constant and integral part in the worship of gods and the ancestors ... so essential are music and dance to ... religious expression that it is no exaggeration to call them ‘danced religions’”. Raboteau, p.15. “Ecstatic behaviour, in the form of spirit possession, is ... central to the liturgy of West African peoples and their descendants in many parts of the New World”. Raboteau, p.59.

<sup>68</sup> Bouson, p.240.

<sup>69</sup> Morrison’s posing of an alternative form of worship has not always been received kindly or identified as such. According to Geoffrey Bent, Consolata’s “healing goes beyond mixing potions and medicinal teas; the woman literally raises the dead by ‘going inside’ people. During the climactic downpour, Consolata has her damaged flock paint things like fetuses and scars in the outlines she traces around their bodies on the floor. Then, after a rambling speech full of incantatory gibberish (‘My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him ...’), she has them shave their heads and dance naked in the rain, which miraculously washes away their traumas. One emerges from the bathos of a scene like this with the realization that magic, in such a context, has more to do with the sentimental than the supernatural”. Geoffrey Bent, ‘Less Than Divine: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*’, *The Southern Review*, 35, 1 (1999), 145-149 (p.148).

She told [the women] of a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children. She spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look ... Of scented cathedrals made of gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation. Of carnations tall as trees. Dwarfs with diamonds for teeth. Snakes aroused by poetry and bells. Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word (263-4).

Such wonder and beauty captivates Connie's audience. Indeed, she evokes a fantastical heaven which gratifies the physical senses as well as spiritual needs. This location, however, is also reminiscent of her home continent, because of both its fabulous nature, which echoes South American magic realist writing, and its coastal landscape inhabited by a figure called "Piedade", a name which means either piety or compassion in Portuguese. Consolata's dazzling vision thus signifies a symbolic return to or reconnection with Brazil. Hers is no sober or stately paradise, but rather is celebratory and playful, a realm of jewels and fish, dwarfs and snakes, expression through poetry and song. Even religious worship appears to have been re-imagined as in this land the "gods and goddesses" sit amongst their followers. This implies poly- rather than monotheism, and a form of divine authority different to that of Christianity. The deities' integration with the congregation is, in addition, suggestive of the orishas of Candomblé who join believers during rituals. The mysterious figure of Piedade, whose songs "could still a wave, make it pause in its curl listening to language it had not heard since the sea opened", is associated with ancient knowledge, indeed the very genesis of life (285). Hers is a musical "language" of mesmerising beauty and wisdom, yet because she never "sa[ys] a word" it subverts The Word of the patriarchal God of the Bible.

Significantly Piedade is the focus of the final passage of the novel. Here, like Misner's black Christ, her image revises traditional Christian iconography:

In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells – wheat, roses, pearl – fuse in the younger woman's face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf. There is nothing to beat solace which is what Piedade's song is about (318).

Instead of an orthodox representation of Mary cradling Christ's crucified body, the text offers a re-envisioned *pietà*, describing Piedade supporting Consolata on her lap. This is not a depiction of death, of mourning over a corpse, but one celebrating intimacy and life. The adored face "framed in cerulean blue" recalls portrayals of the Virgin Mary, but also perhaps Connie's relationship to Mary Magna whose "beautiful framed face" looked over her as a child (224). Yet whilst the Reverend Mother was white, Piedade is pictured as "black as firewood".<sup>70</sup> *Paradise* thus invokes Catholic iconography yet reveals it to have been appropriated into an alternative form of Christianity. Piedade's name suggests the tradition of the *pieta*, but also the respect due to ancestors, something perhaps related to Consolata's reconnection with her homeland? Certainly her vision of a black Madonna constitutes a counternarrative to the doctrine of the institutional religion that 'rescued' her.<sup>71</sup>

The description of heaven offered at the end of the novel, in addition, evokes Brazil through its inclusion of "sea trash". Litter such as bottle tops and a broken radio grounds the scene in a worldly, rather than a celestial realm. For this is the detritus of modern technology and mass manufacture, signalling materiality as well as the forces of consumption. The waste washed up on the shoreline resists the situation of paradise in a spiritual sphere, once more illustrating theological revision. The fact that the trash "gleams" and "sparkle[s]" perhaps also recalls and subverts the rich decoration of religious icons.

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<sup>70</sup> It is hinted earlier that she is of African origin: "At night she took the stars out of her hair and wrapped [Consolata] in its wool" (285).

<sup>71</sup> Piedade has significance in terms of the representations of the Virgin Mary as black that are found within churches and shrines around the world. Ean Beggs' study of this phenomenon offers a comprehensive analysis. Discussing her reputed powers he writes, "she has always helped her supplicants to circumvent the rigidities of patriarchal legislation and is traditionally on the side of physical processes – healing the sick, easing the pangs of childbirth, making the milk flow. She knows how to break rigid masculine rules, bringing dead babies back to life long enough to receive baptism and escape from limbo to paradise, looking with tolerance on the sins of the flesh as when she acts as midwife to a pregnant abbess or stands in for a truant nun tasting for a time the illicit pleasures of sin". Ean Beggs, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Arkana, 1996), p.28. Beggs even catalogues a Black Virgin of considerable reputation in Brazil: "Aparecida de Norte São Paulo ... Nossa Senhora de Aparecida, formerly do Conceição. Brazil's most venerated religious image; terra cotta; 39 cm; standing on crescent moon in prayer; no child ... Many miracles; living cult. The Brazilian goddess of the seas and mother of the earth, Jemanjá, is represented as black". Beggs, p.163. It has been suggested that the Black Madonna may have Gnostic-Christian origins, a possibility that might relate to Morrison's choice of an epigraph from the Nag Hammadi Codices for *Paradise*.



*Paradise*'s concluding pietà (featuring a black Virgin Mary and a second, mixed race woman) creates a powerful inversion of iconographic tradition yet the novel also explores a synthesis of forms of worship that goes beyond revisionism. Brazilian religious practice often combines Catholicism, introduced by the Portuguese colonisers, with other beliefs derived from African and native cosmology. Morrison, I propose, draws on this mixed New World heritage in her depiction of Connie's mission and vision of heaven. For example, by associating her Madonna with the sea, the author echoes the oceanic affinity of Yemanjá, one of the orisha gods of Candomblé. Indeed, several of Yemanjá's characteristics can also be identified in Piedade. The text hence alludes to the fusing of Christian figures with gods from other pantheons that has taken place since slavery in the Americas began. As Voeks notes, "[o]ne of the striking processes that occurred in Candomblé, as well as throughout the New World African religious landscape, was the intellectual integration of the Yoruba orixás ... with the deified saints of the Catholic Church".<sup>72</sup> Here Consolata's evolution of a new religion is shown to combine both Catholic doctrine and imagery, and theological legacies from Brazil, permitting Morrison to invoke a truly diasporic sense of black culture. The Convent's belief system not only provides an alternative to institutional religion, but also enacts a positive model of creolisation.

My reading of the trajectory of *Paradise*, the devastating effects of Ruby's ethnic absolutism and the evolution of an oppositional community at the Convent, can perhaps be furthered by reference to Edouard Glissant's ideas of creolité and antillanité. Although concerned with the specific history and culture of Martinique, within *Caribbean Discourse* Glissant also envisions a wider

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<sup>72</sup> Voeks, p.59. "[T]hus Oxalá is syncretized to Jesus; Iansã to Saint Barbara; Yemanjá to the Virgin Mary". Voeks, p.61. Raboteau writes, "[t]he most immediately apparent innovation that Santería, Shango and Candomblé have brought to African theological perspectives is the identification of African gods with Catholic saints. Initially the veneration of saints must have provided the slaves with a convenient disguise for secret worship of African gods ... Furthermore, Catholic popular piety has long been open to syncretism with 'pagan' belief and practice. No fundamental contradiction existed between veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints in Catholic piety, on the one hand, and devotion to the *orisha* and *vodun* in African religions, on the other". Raboteau, pp.22-3.

configuration.<sup>73</sup> Engendered by the displacements of slavery and colonisation in the New World, this nexus is one of disruption and alienation yet has “potential ... for the process of creolization”.<sup>74</sup> Glissant’s paradigm of cross-cultural relations thus anticipates the work of Paul Gilroy. Finding black diaspora peoples to be distinguished by their history of dislocation, he writes “[t]here is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities”.<sup>75</sup> Yet Glissant does not conceive processes of creolisation to be limited to such peoples and refuses definitions of cultural exchange and mutation as corruptive, bastardising.<sup>76</sup> Discussing Martinique and its enduring colonisation as a Department of France, Glissant identifies the responses of cultural diversion, “the mimetic impulse”, and reversion, “the obsession with a single origin: one must not alter the absolute state of being. To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact”.<sup>77</sup> Neither of these strategies alone are found to facilitate decolonisation: “Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the

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<sup>73</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p.117.

<sup>74</sup> Glissant, p.14.

<sup>75</sup> He continues, “I feel that what makes this difference between a people that survives elsewhere, *that maintains its original nature*, and a population that is transformed elsewhere *into another people* (without, however, succumbing to the reductive pressures of the Other) and that thus enter the constantly shifting and variable process of creolization (of relationships, of relativity), is that the latter has not brought with it, not collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted. These methods leave only dim traces or survive in the forms of spontaneous impulses”. Glissant, pp.14-17.

<sup>76</sup> “Creolization as an idea is not primarily the glorification of the composite nature of a people: indeed, no people has been spared the cross-cultural process. The idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify ‘unique’ origins that the race safeguards and prolongs. In Western tradition, genealogical descent guarantees racial exclusivity, just as Genesis legitimizes genealogy. To assert peoples are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of ‘creolized’ that is considered as halfway between two ‘pure’ extremes”. Glissant, p.140. According to Michael Dash, in his “definition of the Caribbean in terms of openness, of *errance* and of an intricate, unceasing branching of cultures, Glissant is careful not to claim an exclusive right to this experience by Caribbean peoples. In deconstructing the notions of pure and impure, he sees the world in terms of ceaseless cultural transformation and subverts the old temptation to essentialist and exclusivist strategies”. J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.147.

<sup>77</sup> Glissant, pp.16-18.

forces of creolization, or perish”.<sup>78</sup> Glissant hence envisions a way forward, going on to consider both instances of a failure to productively put to work the forces of creolisation and engagements that are more successful in turning towards the point of entanglement, renegotiating the experience of what he terms nonhistory.<sup>79</sup> These can be usefully related to my discussion of religious cultures in *Paradise*.

In her delineation of Consolata’s mission Morrison evokes the syncretism of African Brazilian forms of worship. When Connie reinvents life at the Convent she subverts the European originating Christian theology into which she had been assimilated and devises a new mode of religion that draws on South American slave heritages. Hence *Paradise* incorporates an empowering use of creolisation, the turn to Brazilian culture apparently enabling Morrison to play out a process not evident within the black U.S. community that she depicts. Whilst the churches of Ruby undoubtedly exemplify African American forms of Christianity, appropriating the Exodus story and, in the case of Misner, formulating a black Christ, they can also be associated with reversion. Both the Morgans’ separatist and absolutist notion of community, and Misner’s vision of the originary time and space of an African home “consecrate permanence” and “negate contact”. The Convent’s evolution, however, is grounded in “entanglement” and implies a wider diasporic context.<sup>80</sup>

The invocation of Brazil is significant in terms of both it being a site outside of the U.S., and therefore indicative of transnational black Atlantic relations, and its particular history of slavery. Slavery persisted in Brazil until 1888 and slaves were transported into the country in far greater numbers than in North America where after trading was prohibited, plantation owners depended on internal slave population growth.<sup>81</sup> The prolonged direct African influence of newly shipped slaves is thought to have contributed to the distinctiveness of African Brazilian culture. The Bahia region in particular received slaves traded from the coast of

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<sup>78</sup> Glissant, p.26.

<sup>79</sup> See Glissant, pp.61-2.

<sup>80</sup> Glissant, p.18 & p.26.

the Gulf of Guinea, including many Yorubas whose African belief systems helped shape Candomblé.<sup>82</sup> This history undoubtedly informed the specific processes of creolisation at work in Brazil and perhaps Morrison's own creation of Consolata as a new and revised Reverend Mother. Yet whilst *Paradise* affirms Candomblé's African legacy for the empowering syncretism and connection it enables, ethnic absolutism is firmly rejected.<sup>83</sup> The Convent constitutes an inclusive, rather than exclusive cultural space: the "loud dreaming" is shared by all the women, black and white, North and South American.<sup>84</sup>

Morrison's exploration of religious life is furthered by the resolution of her text. Indeed, *Paradise* concludes with a somewhat unusual epilogue. At its close the narrative returns to the attack on the Convent women that opened the novel, this time depicting the resistance they offered to the men of Ruby.<sup>85</sup> This second account, however, reveals that after the assault "[n]o bodies" could be found, "[n]othing. Even the Cadillac was gone" (292). The fate of Consolata's followers is hence unclear: Lone believes that God "had actually swept up and received His servants in broad daylight" whilst others claim that the women must

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<sup>81</sup> Arthur Ramos cites the Brazilian historian, Calogeras, as claiming that over four centuries eighteen million slaves were imported to Brazil. Arthur Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*, trans. by Richard Pattee (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1980), p.6.

<sup>82</sup> Ramos, p.12 & p.82. See also Raboteau, p.40. On Brazilian culture see also Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992).

<sup>83</sup> This in itself reflects the nature of New World encounters: "Nowhere in the Americas would Africans be able to duplicate their traditional religious systems. What they were able to do, and often very successfully, was to piece together new systems from the remnants of the old". Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Woods, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp.39-40. "The vestiges of these native African systems in the Americas are uniquely American: not distant outposts of ancient cultures, but amalgams of African, European, Amerindian, and other traditions". Voeks, p.4.

<sup>84</sup> Although Morrison's creation of the Convent as a female space has been interpreted as absolutist along lines of sex, in fact the women from the start have taken in male refugees as well as female (namely the alcoholic Vietnam veteran Menus Jury) and in the climactic scene of their rain dance Pallas' newly born son forms a part of this vision of fulfilment.

<sup>85</sup> The Oklahoman Protestants view the aesthetics and practices of Catholicism with suspicion and misunderstanding: "graven idols were worshipped here. Tiny men and women in white dresses and capes of blue and gold stand on little shelves cut into niches in the wall. Holding a baby or gesturing, their blank faces fake innocence. Candles had obviously burned at their feet and ... food had probably been offered as well" (9). They condemn the Convent women for a lack of piety: "in a place that once housed Christians – well, Catholics anyway – not a cross of Jesus anywhere" (7). In fact, as part of their recovery Connie's followers have removed the symbols of orthodox religion: "Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus" (12). In the cellar where the women inscribed their templates the intruders "observe defilement and violence and perversions beyond imagination. Lovingly drawn filth carpets the stone floor

have escaped (298). Separated from the rest of the text, the final section of the novel appears to describe a space or dimension different to all those encountered so far.<sup>86</sup> Bouson calls it “a magical scene of escape and resurrection” whereas Matus refers to “the miracle of life transferred to a new realm or mode”.<sup>87</sup> In this disorienting conclusion each of the Convent women is portrayed in turn, apparently whole and well as if going on with her life. Gigi is pictured reunited with her long estranged father, Pallas, bearing a “beatific” smile, a “sword” and her baby, revisits her mother’s home, Mavis meets with the daughter left behind when she went on the run years before, and Seneca encounters the sister/mother who abandoned her as a child (see 310-7). These scenes of familial reconciliation (or at least assured indifference) suggest that the women have overcome their troubled pasts. In addition, they are revealed to be physically embodied, eating and experiencing both pain and sensory pleasure. This adds to the ambiguity of their situation and Morrison’s resolution, leaving readers to wonder what kind of ‘afterlife’ is imagined.<sup>88</sup>

The epilogue also presents the *pietà* discussed earlier. In a fantastical land by the ocean Consolata and Piedade sing of “the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home” (318). “Another ship” approaches their shore “but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved” (318). This mysterious vessel recalls those that once transported Africans across the Middle Passage yet,

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... None dares step on it” (287). Such interpretations illustrate the townsmen’s closed minds but also their fears about female powers and perhaps of a woman-centred religion.

<sup>86</sup> This is hinted at when Anna Flood and Reverend Misner visit the Convent and become aware of somekind of portal or entrance. In the garden, near Connie’s chair “they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. ‘No, a window’, he said, laughing ... focusing on the sign rather than the event ... Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?” (305). Later at a child’s funeral, looking “at the coffin lid [Misner again] saw the window in the garden, felt it beckon toward another place – neither life nor death – but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had” (307). This incident signals the space of possibility written into the discourse that follows.

<sup>87</sup> Bouson, p.213 and Matus, p.164.

<sup>88</sup> According to Bouson “[t]he Convent women ... become a kind of collective mythic presence in the novel. Like their literary predecessors, *Beloved* and the *Beloved*-like Wild ... they become by the end of the novel at once real and unreal – everywhere and nowhere – as they ... both die in the assault on the Convent and yet escape”. Bouson, p.194. Possibly, however, Morrison alludes to African notions of the living dead. John Mbiti writes, “[t]he living-dead are still ‘people’, and have not yet become ‘things’, ‘spirits’ or ‘its’. They return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically”. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p.82.

unlike the slave ships, it is “heading to port”. The novel’s closing scene hence evokes the dislocatory journeys of the black Atlantic but also a (South American?) homecoming. After this voyage “crew and passengers” alike will share the fate of “shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). The trajectory of “down here” inverts the traditional ascent of the chosen to a celestial realm *and* hints at a Southward bound geographical route. In addition, the labour awaiting the new arrivals appears to be egalitarian but also eternal, perhaps indicating a revision of both heaven and purgatory? Morrison’s epilogue thus concludes her trilogy in an unusual but hopeful way, reconceiving paradise itself so that it is not “defined ... by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange” (306).<sup>89</sup>

The gratifying and redemptive nature of the image with which *Paradise* ends contrasts sharply with the spectacular failure of the utopian dream of Ruby. Indeed, Tally writes, “[t]he reader cannot help but relate the sterility of the isolationist, class-conscious, ‘all-black’ community of Ruby to the fecund, anarchic but vibrant inclusiveness of the ‘raceless’ Convent”.<sup>90</sup> Unlike her vision of the all black town, Morrison’s depiction of Consolata’s imaginative mission and afterlife is celebratory. I propose that she here attempts to re-envision patriarchal Christianity, but also investigate the complex evolution of New World cultures. For the holy community of the Convent not only resists damaging gender ideologies and polarisation of the spiritual and the material, in addition, it draws on the practices of Brazilian Candomblé. Thus Connie’s “unorganised magic” enacts syncretism and an affirmative model of creolisation. *Paradise*’s symbolic evocation of South America foregrounds African cultural

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<sup>89</sup> As Tally observes, “[t]he final vignette, which some reviewers have seen as lyrical but extraneous to the text, actually reinforces the ending both of *Paradise* itself ... and of the complete trilogy. The pietà image is constructed of the reunion of the mother and daughter, at peace and at home in body and soul”. Tally, p.68. “Far from a utopia built on exclusion and isolation, Morrison conceptualizes ‘paradise’ (with a small ‘p’) as an earthly endeavor constructed of a common bond and including all people, not just an exclusive few, ‘crew and passengers’ alike”. Tally, p.93. However, the epilogue has not always been favourably received: “Morrison wraps up the whole enormous tale with a rather self-conscious magical-realist conclusion, in which the shot women are snatched off into a mystical afterlife”. Natasha Walter, ‘How Paradise was lost’, *The Guardian*, 26 March 1998, 12-13 (p.13). “[T]he novel’s one surreal set-piece feels like a hasty afterthought, clumsily grafted on to try to kick start the story to another level”. Michiko Kakutani, ‘Worthy Women, Unredeemable Men’, *New York Times*, 6 January 1998, E8.

<sup>90</sup> Tally, p.31.

survivals but, at the same time, does not imply the nostalgic impulse towards return of Misner's idealised African home. The dislocations of the black diaspora, it would appear, necessitate the formulation of new strategies of resistance.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored the theme and figure of dislocation within the later novels of Toni Morrison. It has addressed the author's engagement with the black diaspora, her depiction of its sites of remembering as well as its displacements and losses. Bringing together considerations of geographical, communal, familial, cultural, corporeal and narrative dislocation, I have traced the various kinds of deracination and disruption that preoccupy Morrison's fiction. This has involved examination of her portrayal of personal and collective experiences of suffering, the former often standing for or recalling the latter. My analysis has also, however, identified the retentions, recoveries, connections and evolutions that enable Morrison to present affirmative visions of rootedness (or, indeed, 'routedness') within the so-called New World. This imaginary accords with that of Robert Hayden's provocative poetic line "[s]huttles in the rocking loom of history", a phrase suggesting processes of movement, traversal and interaction while, at the same time, evoking, and therefore remaining grounded in, a history of hegemonic displacement and oppression. Morrison, I have argued, renders the violent dislocations engendered by racial slavery, yet also celebrates the thoroughly 'modern' strategies formulated to resist them.

My project has found especially useful the theories of Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy. Their envisionings of the black diaspora have informed my reading of Morrison's work which, although focused largely on blacks in the U.S., is open to, and faces out towards, the wider configuration of the black Atlantic. The author's concern with revisiting the African American past, and her depiction of characters' necessary struggles to confront their individual pasts, resonates with Glissant's discussion of a disturbed historical consciousness. Morrison's novels also, however, chart significant spatial trajectories both within and across the borders of the American continent. Such dynamics recall patterns of previous migration and travel, so describing a compelling symbolic geography. My approach to this aspect of Morrison's fiction has been shaped by Gilroy's paradigm of "routes".



Chapter One examined Morrison's re-imagining of the American landscape in terms of black experience in *Song of Solomon*. It identified the various journeys through, and relations to space used by the author to speak to African American dislocation and connection. Chapter Two considered *Beloved*'s exploration of the displacements of slavery through questions of race and gender ideology. It also investigated the figuration of the haunting rupture of the Middle Passage and of physical abuse and pain, linking such themes to the novel's difficult narrative form. Chapter Three, treating *Jazz*, returned to the evocation of a symbolic geography of North and South, in particular charting urban disassociation. It, in addition, demonstrated how Morrison employs metaphors of bodily dismemberment and disruption to portray familial and racial dislocation and positioned her revision of the trope of the Talking Book within a black literary tradition concerned with issues of literacy and orality. Chapter Four, through the two themes of war and religion, examined the opposition established within *Paradise* between Ruby, associated with ethnic absolutism, patriarchy, imperialism and violence, and the Convent, depicted as offering an affirmative model of openness and creolisation.

Although my thesis has addressed four of Morrison's novels in the order of their publication, it has not been my aim here to trace a particular evolution or progression in her artistic production and intellectual thinking. Nevertheless, it is perhaps significant that in *Paradise*, the author's most recent, if not best received, work of fiction, she most explicitly sets a paradigm of separatism and essentialism against a paradigm of heterogeneity and cross-cultural exchange. Morrison's portrayal of the demise of the dream of Ruby and her celebration of the syncretic and creative vision of the Convent seems to me a declaration of the fruitlessness of a rigid notion of rootedness, the possibilities of routedness.

Toni Morrison's fictional explorations of African American identity and history have prompted numerous and diverse critical responses. My project, however, has worked to extend this scholarship by bringing to bear the term dislocation in a way that encompasses the myriad forms of displacement and alienation that her novels depict. This approach has allowed me to map the devastating effects of racist oppression, and, at the same time, the sense of

potentiality and affirmation, portrayed within Morrison's writing. Investigating her work in such a manner, and drawing on ideas of a black Atlantic in so doing, throws new light on it and rejects a narrowly defined version of African American Studies. My thesis, I hope, has thus contributed in a worthwhile way to the study of this much renowned contemporary author.

Although it has not been within the scope of my research here to examine Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, this text is suggestive in terms of future work. The novel is set on a fictional island within the French Caribbean. And the significance of this location as part of a black Atlantic imaginary, but also as a site invested with a different (and at times idealised) mode of African Americanness begs interrogation. Whilst my thesis has concentrated on the four of Morrison's publications most pertinent to its claims, *Tar Baby* presents interesting possibilities for extending my exploration of the author's engagement with the black diaspora.

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